

The Hallowell Partnership



Katharine Holland Brown

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THE
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CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS



ON THE EDGE OF THE OPPOSITE BANK STOOD THE QUAINTEST,
PRETTIEST GROUP THAT HER EYES HAD EVER BEHELD.

THE HALLOWELL PARTNERSHIP

BY

KATHARINE HOLLAND BROWN

AUTHOR OF "PHILIPPA AT HALCYON," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1921

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To

THE HOUSE OF THE BROWN THRUSH

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On the edge of the opposite bank stood the quaintest,
prettiest group that her eyes had ever beheld *Frontispiece*

FACING
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Marian could only lie by the fire and tease Empress and
fret the endless hours away 16

"Well, Captain Lathrop!" Commodore McCloskey's
voice rang merciless and clear 138

Marian was on her knees by his chair, clasping his
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The Hallowell Partnership

CHAPTER I

WHEN SLOW-COACH GOT HIS FIGHTING CHANCE

"Rod!"

No answer.

"Rod, what did that messenger boy bring? A special-delivery letter? Is it anything interesting?" Marian Hallowell pushed Empress from her knee and turned on her pillows to look at Roderick, her brother, who sat absorbed and silent at his desk.

Roderick did not move. Only Empress cocked a topaz eye, and rubbed her orange-tawny head against Marian's chair.

"Rod, why don't you answer me?" Marian's thin hands twitched. A sharp, fretted line deepened across her pretty, girlish forehead. It was not a pleasant line to see. And through her long, slow convalescence it had grown deeper every day.

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"Roderick Hallowell!"

Roderick jumped. He turned his sober, kind face to her, then bent eagerly to the closely written letter in his hand.

"Just a minute, Sis."

"Oh, very well, Slow-Coach!" Marian lay back, with a resigned sniff. She pulled Empress up by her silver collar, and lay petting the big, satiny Persian, who purred like a happy windmill against her cheek. Her tired eyes wandered restlessly about the dim, high-ceiled old room. Of all the dreary lodgings on Beacon Hill, surely Roderick had picked out the most forlorn! Still, the old place was quiet and comfortable. And, as Roderick had remarked, his rooms were amazingly inexpensive. That had been an important point; especially since Marian's long, costly illness at college. That siege had been hard on Rod in many ways, she thought, with a mild twinge of self-reproach. In a way, those long weeks of suffering had come through her own fault. The college physician had warned her more than once that she was working and playing beyond her strength. Yet she felt extremely ill-used.

"It wasn't nearly so bad, while I stayed in the infirmary at college." She sighed as she thought of her bright, airy room, the coming and going of the girls with their gay petting and sympathy, the roses and magazines and dainties. "But here, in this tiresome, lonely place! How can I expect to get well!"

Here she lay, shut up in Rod's rooms, alone day after day, save for the vague, pottering kindnesses of Rod's vague old landlady. At night her brother would come home from his long day's work as cub draughtsman in the city engineer's office, too tired to talk. And Marian, forbidden by overstrained eyes to read, could only lie by the fire, and tease Empress, and fret the endless hours away.

At last, with a deep breath, Rod laid down the letter. He pulled his chair beside her lounge.

"Tired, Sis?"

"Not very. What was your letter, Rod?"

"I'll tell you pretty soon. Anything doing to-day?"

"Isabel and Dorothy came in from Wellesley this morning, and brought me those lovely violets,

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and told me all about the Barn Swallows' masque dance last night. And the doctor came this afternoon."

"H'm. What did he say?"

Marian gloomed.

"Just what he always says. 'No more study this year. Out-door life. Bread and milk and sleep.' Tiresome!"

Roderick nodded.

"Hard lines, Sister. And yet——"

He dropped his sentence, and sat staring at the fire.

"Rod! Are you never going to tell me what is in that letter?"

"That letter? Oh, yes. Sure it won't tire you to talk business?"

"Of course not."

"Well, then—I have an offer of a new position. A splendid big one at that."

"A new position? Truly?" Marian sat up, with brightening eyes.

"Yes. But I'm not sure I can swing it." Rod's face clouded. "It demands a mighty competent engineer."

"Well! Aren't you a competent engineer?" Marian gave his ear a mild tweak. "You're always underrating yourself, you old goose. Tell me about this. Quick."

Rod's thoughtful face grew grave.

"It's such a gorgeous chance that I can't half believe in it," he said, at length. "Through Professor Young, I'm offered an engineer's billet with the Breckenridge Engineering and Construction Company. The Breckenridge Company is the largest and the best-known firm of engineers in the United States. Breckenridge himself is a wonder. I'd rather work under him than under any man I ever heard of. The work is a huge drainage contract in western Illinois. One hundred dollars a month and all my expenses. It's a two-year job."

"A two-year position, out West!" Marian's eyes shone. "The out-West part is dreadful, of course. But think of a hundred-dollar salary, after the sixty dollars that you have been drudging to earn ever since you left Tech! Read Professor Young's letter aloud; do."

Roderick squirmed.

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"Oh, you don't want to hear it. It's nothing much."

"Yes I do, too. Read it, I say. Or—give it to me. There!"

There was a short, lively scuffle. However, Marian had captured the letter with the first deft snatch; and Roderick could hardly take it from her shaky, triumphant hands by main force. He gave way, grumbling.

"Professor Young always says a lot of things he doesn't mean. He does it to brace a fellow up, that's all."

"Very likely." Marian's eyes skimmed down the first page.

"—And as the company has asked me to recommend an engineer of whose work I can speak from first-hand knowledge, I have taken pleasure in referring them to you. To be sure, you have had no experience in drainage work. But from what I recall of your record at Tech, your fundamental training leaves nothing to be desired. When it comes to handling the mass of rough-and-ready labor that the contract employs, I am confident that your father's son will show the needed judg-

ment and authority. It is a splendid undertaking, this reclamation of waste land. It is heavy, responsible work, but it is a man's work, straight through; and there is enough of chance in it to make it a man's game, as well. If you can make good at this difficult opportunity, you will prove that you can make good at any piece of drainage engineering that comes your way. This is your fighting chance at success. And I expect to see you equal to its heaviest demands. Good luck to you!

"That sounds just like Professor Young. And he means it. Every word." Marian folded the letter carefully and gave it back to her brother. "Honestly, Rod, it does sound too good to be true. And think, what a frabjous time you can have during your vacations! You can run over to the Ozarks for your week-ends, and visit the Moores on their big fruit ranch, and go mountain-climbing——"

Roderick chortled.

"The Ozarks would be a trifling week-end jaunt of three hundred miles, old lady. Didn't they teach you geography at Wellesley? As to moun-

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tains, that country is mostly pee-rary and swamp. That's why this contract will be a two-year job, and a stiff job at that."

"What does district drainage work mean, anyway?"

"In district drainage, a lot of farmers and land-owners unite to form what is called, in law, a drainage district. A sort of mutual benefit association, you might call it. Then they tax themselves, and hire engineers and contractors to dig a huge system of ditches, and to build levees and dikes, to guard their fields against high water. You see, an Illinois farmer may own a thousand acres of the richest alluvial land. But if half that land is swamp, and the other half lies so low that the creeks near by may overflow and ruin his crops any day, then his thousand mellow acres aren't much more use than ten acres of hard-scrabble here in New England. To be sure, he can cut his own ditches, and build his own levee, without consulting his neighbors. But the best way is for the whole country-side to unite and do the work on a royal scale."

"How do they go about digging those ditches?

Where can they find laboring men to do the work, away out in the country?"

"Why, you can't dig a forty-foot district canal by hand, Sis! That would be a thousand-year job. First, the district calls in an experienced engineer to look over the ground and make plans and estimates. Next, it employs a drainage contractor; say, the Breckenridge firm. This firm puts in three or four huge steam dredge-boats, a squad of dump-carts and scrapers, an army of laborers, and a staff of engineers—including your eminent C. E. brother—to oversee the work. The dredges begin by digging a series of canals; one enormous one, called the main ditch, which runs the length of the district and empties into some large body of water; in this case, the Illinois River. Radiating from this big ditch, they cut a whole family of little ditches, called laterals. The main ditch is to carry off the bulk of water in case of freshets; while the laterals drain the individual farms."

"It sounds like slow, costly work."

"It is. And you've heard only half of it, so far. Then, following the dredges, come the laborers,

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with their teams and shovels and dump-carts. Along the banks of the ditch they build low brush-and-stone-work walls and fill them in with earth. These walls make a levee. So, even if the floods come, and your ditch runs bank-full, the levee will hold back the water and save the crops from ruin. Do you see?"

"Ye-es. But it sounds rather tangled, Rod."

"It isn't tangled at all. Look." Rod's pencil raced across the envelope. "Here's a rough outline of this very contract. This squirmy line is Willow Creek. It is a broad, deep stream, and it runs for thirty crooked miles through the district, with swampy shores all the way. A dozen smaller creeks feed into it. They're swampy, too. So you can see how much good rich farm-land is being kept idle.



"This straight line is the main ditch, as planned. It will cut straight through the creek course, as the crow flies. Do you see, that means we'll make a new channel for the whole stream? A straight, deep channel, too, not more than ten miles long,

instead of the thirty twisted, wasteful miles of the old channel. The short lines at right angles to the main ditch represent the little ditches, or laterals. They'll carry off surplus water from the farm-lands: even from those that lie back from the creek, well out of harm's way."

"What will your work be, Rod?"

"I'll probably be given a night shift to boss. That is—if I take the job at all. The laborers are divided into two shifts, eleven hours each. The dredges have big search-lights, and puff along by night, regardless."

"How will you live?"

"We engineers will be allotted a house-boat to ourselves, and we'll mess together. The laborers live on a big boat called the quarter-boat. The firm furnishes food and bunks, tools, stationery, everything, even to overalls and quinine."

"Quinine?"

"Yes. Those Illinois swamps are chock-full of chills and fever."

"Cheerful prospect! What if you get sick, Rod?"

"Pooh. I never had a sick day in all my life.

However, the farm-houses, up on higher ground, are out of the malaria belt. If I get so Miss Nancy-fied that I can't stay in the swamp, I can sleep at a farm-house. They say there are lots of pleasant people living down through that section. It is a beautiful country, too. I—I'd like it immensely, I imagine."

"Of course you will. But what makes you speak so queerly, Rod? You're certainly going to accept this splendid chance!"

Rod's dark, sober face settled into unflinching lines.

"We'll settle that later. What about you, Sis? If I go West, where will you go? How will you manage without me?"

"Oh, I'll go up to Ipswich for the summer. Just as I always do."

Rod considered.

"That won't answer, Marian. Now that the Comstocks have moved away, there is nobody there to look after you. And you'd be lonely, too."

"Well, then, I can go to Dublin. Cousin Evelyn will give me a corner in her cottage."

"But Cousin Evelyn sails for Norway in June."

"Dear me, I forgot! Then I'll visit some of the girls. Isabel was teasing me this morning to come to their place at Beverly Farms for August. Though—I don't know——"

Rod's serious young eyes met hers. A slow red mounted to his thatched black hair.

"I don't believe that would work, Sis. I hate to spoil your fun. But—we can't afford that sort of thing, dear."

"I suppose not. To spend a month with Isabel and her mother, in that Tudor palace of theirs, full of man-servants, and maid-servants, and regiments of guests, and flocks and herds of automobiles, would cost me more, in new clothes alone, than the whole summer at Ipswich. But, Rod, where can I stay? I'd go cheerfully and camp on my relatives, only we haven't a relative in the world, except Cousin Evelyn. Besides, I—I don't see how I can ever stand it, anyway!" Her fretted voice broke, quivering. Mindful of Rod's boyish hatred of sentiment, she gulped back the sob in her throat; but her weak hand clutched his sleeve. "There are only the two of us, Rod, and we've

never been separated in all our lives. Not even for a single week. I—I can't let you go away out there and leave me behind."

Now, on nine occasions out of ten, Slow-Coach was Rod's fitting title. This was the tenth time. He stooped over Marian, his black eyes flashing. His big hand caught her trembling fingers tight.

"That will just do, Sis. Stop your forebodings, you precious old 'fraid-cat. I'm going to pack you up and take you right straight along."

"Why, Roderick Thayer Hallowell!"

Marian gasped. She stared up at her brother, wide-eyed.

"Why, I couldn't possibly go with you. It's absurd. I daren't even think of it."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's such a queer, wild place. And it is so horribly far away. And I'm not strong enough for roughing it."

"Nonsense. Illinois isn't a frontier. It's only two days' travel from Boston. As for roughing it, think of the Vermont farm-houses where we've stayed on fishing trips. Remember the smothery feather-beds, and the ice-cold pickled beets and pie

for breakfast? Darkest Illinois can't be worse than that."

"N-no, I should hope not. But it will be so tedious and dull!"

"Didn't the doctor order you to spend a dull summer? Didn't he prescribe bread and milk and sleep?"

"Rod, I won't go. I can't. I'd be perfectly miserable. There, now!"

Roderick gave her a long, grave look.

"Then I may as well write and decline the Breckenridge offer, Sis. For I'll take you with me, or else stay here with you. That's all."

"Rod, you're so contrary!" Marian's lips quivered. "You must go West. I won't have you stay here and drudge forever at office work. You must not throw away this splendid chance. It isn't possible!"

"It isn't possible for me to do anything else, Sis." Roderick's stolid face settled into granite lines. Marian started at the new ring of authority in his voice. "Haven't you just said that you couldn't stand it to be left behind? Well, I—I'm in the same boat. I can't go off and leave you,

Sis. I won't run the chances of your being sick, or lonely, while I'm a thousand miles away. So you'll have to decide for us both. Either you go with me, or else I stay here and drudge forever, as you call it. For I'd rather drudge forever than face that separation. That's all. Run along to bed now, that's a good girl. You'll need plenty of sleep if you are to start for Illinois with me next week. Good-night."

"Well, but Rod——"

"Run along, I say. Take Empress with you. I want to answer this letter, and she keeps purring like a buzz-saw, and sharpening her claws on my shoes, till I can't think straight."

"But, Rod, you don't understand!" Marian caught his arm. Her eyes brimmed with angry tears. "I don't *want* to go West. I'll hate it. I know I shall. I want to stay here, where I can be with my friends, where I can have a little fun. It's not fair to make me go with you!"

"Oh, I understand, all right." Roderick's eyes darkened. "You will not like the West. You'll not be contented. I know that. But, remember, I'm taking this job for both of us, Sis. We're



MARIAN COULD ONLY LIE BY THE FIRE AND TEASE EMPRESS
AND FRET THE ENDLESS HOURS AWAY.

partners, you know. I wish you could realize that." His voice grew a little wistful. "If you'd be willing to play up——"

"Oh, I'll play up, of course." Marian put her hands on his shoulders and gave him a pettish kiss. "And I'll go West with you. Though I'd rather go to Moscow or the Sahara. Come, Empress! Good-night, Rod."

The door closed behind her quick, impatient step. Roderick sat down at his desk and opened his portfolio. He did not begin to write at once. Instead, he sat staring at the letter in his hand. He was a slow, plodding boy; he was not given to dreaming; but to-night, as he sat there, his sober young face lighted with eager fire. Certain phrases of that magical letter seemed to float and gleam before his eyes.

—"A splendid undertaking . . . heavy, responsible work, but a man's work, and a man's game. . . . This is your fighting chance. If you can make good. . . . And I expect to see you equal to its heaviest demands."

Rod's deep eyes kindled slowly.

"I'll make good, all right," he muttered. His

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strong hand clinched on the folded sheet. "It's my fighting chance. And if I can't win out, with such an opportunity as this one—then I'll take my name off the *Engineering Record* roster and buy me a pick and a shovel!"

CHAPTER II

TRAVELLERS THREE

"READY, Marian? The Limited starts in thirty minutes. We haven't a minute to spare."

"Y-yes." Marian caught up her handbag and hurried into the cab. "Only my trunk keys—I'm not sure——"

"Your trunk keys! You haven't lost them, of all things!"

"No. Here they are, safe in my bag. But Empress has been so frenzied I haven't known which way to turn."

Poor insulted Empress, squirming madly in a wicker basket, glared at Rod, and lifted a wild, despairing yowl.

"You don't propose to leave Mount Vernon Street for the wilds of Illinois without a struggle, do you, Empress?" chuckled Rod. "Never you mind. You'll forget your blue silk cushion and your minced steak and cream, and you'll be chasing plebeian chipmunks in a week. Look at the

river, Marian. You won't see it again in a long while."

Marian followed his glance. It was a silver hoar-frost morning. The sky shone a cloudless blue, the cold, delicious air sparkled, diamond-clear. Straight down Mount Vernon Street the exquisite little panel of the frozen Charles gleamed like a vista of fairyland. Marian stared at it a little wistfully.

"It will all be very different out West, I suppose. I wonder if any Western river can be half as lovely," she pondered.

Roderick did not answer. A sudden worried question stirred in his thought. Yes, the West would be "different." Very different.

"Maybe I've done the worst possible thing in dragging Marian along," he thought. "But it's too late to turn back now. I can only hope that she can stand the change, and that she'll try to be patient and contented."

Marian, on her part, was in high spirits. She had been shut up for so long that to find herself free, and starting on this trip to a new country, delighted her beyond bounds. At South Station, a

crowd of her Wellesley chums stormed down upon her, in what Rod described later as a mass-play, laden with roses and chocolates and gay, loving farewells. Marian tore herself from their hands, half-laughing, half-crying with happy excitement.

"Oh, Rod, I know we're going to have the grandest trip, and the most beautiful good fortunes that ever were!" she cried, as he put her carefully aboard the train. "But you aren't one bit enthusiastic. You stodgy tortoise, why can't you be pleased, too?"

"I'm only too glad if you like the prospect, Sis," he answered soberly.

Marian's spirits soared even higher as the hours passed. Roderick grew as rapt as she when the train whirled through the winter glory of the Berkshires. Every slope rose folded in dazzling snow. Every tree, through mile on mile of forest, blazed in rainbow coats of icy mail. The wide rolling New York country was scarcely less beautiful.

At Buffalo, the next morning, a special pleasure awaited them. A party of friends met them with a huge touring car, and carried them on a fly-

ing trip to the ice-bridge at Niagara Falls. To Marian, every minute spelled enchantment. She forgot her dizzy head and her aching bones, and fairly exulted in the wild splendor of the blue ice-walled cataract. Roderick, on his part, was so absorbed by the marvellous engineering system of the great power-plant that for once he had no eyes nor thought for his sister, nor for any other matter.

Their wonderful day closed with an elaborate dinner-party, given in their honor. Neither Marian nor Rod had ever been guests at so grand an affair. As they dashed to their train in their host's beautiful limousine, Marian looked up from her bouquet of violets and orchids with laughing eyes.

"If this is the West, Rod, I really think it will suit me very well!"

Rod's mouth twisted into a rueful grin.

"Glad you enjoy it, Sis. Gloat over your luxury while you may. You'll find yourself swept out of the limousine zone all too soon. By this time next week you'll be thankful for a spring wagon."

By the next morning, Marian's spirits began to flag. All day they travelled in fog and rain, down through a flat, dun country. Not a gleam of snow lightened those desolate muddy plains. There seemed no end to that sodden prairie, that gray mist-blotted sky. Marian grew more lonely and unhappy with every hour. She struggled to be good-humored for Roderick's sake. But she grew terribly tired; and it was a very white-faced girl who clung to Roderick's arm as their train rolled into the great, clanging terminal at Saint Louis.

Roderick hurried her to a hotel. It seemed to her that she had scarcely dropped asleep before Rod's voice sounded at the door.

"Sorry, Sis, but we'll have to start right away. It's nearly eight o'clock."

"Oh, Rod, I'm so tired! Please let's take a later train."

"There isn't any later train, dear. There isn't any train at all. We're going up-river on a little steamer that is towing a barge-load of coal to our camp. That's the only way to reach the place. There is no railroad anywhere near. There won't

be another steamer going up for days. It's a shame to haul you out, but it can't be helped."

An hour later, they picked their way down the wet, slippery stones of the levee to where the *Lucy Lee*, a tiny flat-bottomed "stern-wheeler," puffed and snorted, awaiting them. As they crossed the gang-plank, the pilot rang the big warning bell. Immediately their little craft nosed its way shivering along the ranks of moored packets, and rocked out into mid-channel.

Marian peered back, but she could see nothing of the city. A thick icy fog hung everywhere, shrouding even the tall warehouses at the river's edge, and drifting in great, gray clouds over the bridges.

"The river is still thick with floating ice," said the captain, at her elbow. "The *Lucy* is the first steam-boat to dare her luck, trying to go up-stream, since the up-river ice gorge let go. But we'll make it all right. It's a pretty chancy trip, yet it's not as dangerous as you'd think."

Marian twinkled. "It looks chancy enough to me," she confessed. She looked out at the broad, turbid stream. Here and there a black patch

marked a drifting ice cake, covered with brush, swept down from some flooded woodland. Through the mist she caught glimpses of high, muddy banks, a group of sooty factories, a gray, murky sky.

"I don't see much charm to the Mississippi, Rod. Is this all there is to it? Just yellow, tumbling water, and mud, and fog?"

"It isn't a beautiful stream, that's a fact," admitted Rod. Yet his eyes sparkled. He was growing more flushed and alert with every turn of the wheels that brought him nearer to his coveted work, his man's game. "This is too raw and cold for you, Marian. Come into the cabin, and I'll fix you all snug by the fire."

"The cabin is so stuffy and horrid," fretted Marian. Yet she added, "But it's the cunningest place I ever dreamed of. It's like a miniature museum."

"A museum? A junk-shop, I'd call it," Rod chuckled, as he settled her into the big red-cushioned rocker, before the roaring cannon stove.

The tight little room was crowded with solemn black-walnut cabinets, full of shells and arrow-heads, and hung thick with quaint, high-colored

old pictures. Languishing ladies in chignons and crinoline gazed upon lordly gentlemen in tall stocks and gorgeous waistcoats; "Summer Prospects," in vivid chromos fronted "Snow Scenes," made realistic with much powdered isinglass. Crowning all, rose a tall, cupid-wreathed gilt mirror, surmounted by a stern stuffed eagle, who glared down fiercely from two yellow glass eyes. His mighty wings spread above the mirror, a bit moth-eaten, but still terrifying.

"Look, Empress. Don't you want to catch that nice birdie?"

Poor bewildered Empress glared at the big bird, and sidled, back erect, wrathfully sissing, under a chair. Travel had no charms for Empress.

"Will you look at that old yellowed pilot's map and certificate in the acorn frame? '1857!'" chuckled Rod. "And the red-and-blue worsted motto hung above it: 'Home, Sweet Home!' I'll wager Grandma Noah did that worsted-work."

"Not Grandma Noah, but Grandma McCloskey," laughed the captain. "She was the nicest old lady you ever laid eyes on. She used to live on the boat and cook for us, till the rheumatism

forced her to live ashore. Her husband is old Commodore McCloskey; so everybody calls him. He has been a pilot on the Mississippi ever since the day he got that certificate, yonder. He's a character, mind that. He shot that eagle in '58, and he has carried it around with him ever since, to every steamer that he has piloted. You must go up to the pilot-house after a bit and make him a visit. He's worth knowing."

"I think I'd like to go up to the pilot-house right away, Rod. It is so close and hot down here."

Obediently Rod gathered up her rugs and cushions. Carefully he and the captain helped her up the swaying corkscrew stairs, across the dizzy, rain-swept hurricane deck, then up the still narrower, more twisty flight that ended at the door of the high glass-walled box, perched like a bird-cage, away forward.

Inside that box stood a large wooden wheel, and a small, twinkling, white-bearded old gentleman, who looked for all the world like a Santa Claus masquerading in yellow oilskins.

"Ask him real pretty," cautioned the captain.

"He thinks he runs this boat, and everybody aboard her. He does, too, for a fact."

With much ceremony Roderick rapped at the glass door, and asked permission for his sister to enter. With grand aplomb the little old gentleman rose from his wheel and ushered her up the steps.

"'Tis for fifty-four years that I and me pilot-house have been honored by the ladies' visits," quoth he, with a stately bow. "Ye'll sit here, behind the wheel, and watch me swing herself up the river? Sure, 'tis a ticklish voyage, wid the river so full of floatin' ice. I shall be glad of yer gracious presence, ma'am. It will bring me good luck in me steerin'."

Marian's eyes danced. She fitted herself neatly into the cushioned bench against the wall. The pilot-house was a bird-cage, indeed, hardly eight feet square. The great wheel, swinging in its high frame, took up a third of the space; a huge cast-iron stove filled one corner. For the rest, Marian felt as if she had stepped inside one of the curio-cabinets in the cabin below; for every inch of wall space in the bird-cage was festooned

with mementoes of every sort. A string of beautiful wampum, all polished elks' teeth and uncut green turquoise; shell baskets, and strings of buckeyes; a four-foot diamond-back rattlesnake's skin, beautiful and uncanny, the bunch of five rattles tied to the tail. Close beside the glittering skin hung even an odder treasure-trove: a small white kid glove, quaintly embroidered in faded pink-and-blue forget-me-nots.

"Great-Aunt Emily had some embroidered gloves like that in her trousseau," thought Marian. "I do wonder——"

"Ye're lookin' at me keepsakes?" The pilot sighted up-stream, then turned, beaming. "Maybe it will pass the time like for me to tell ye of them. There is not one but stands for an adventure. That wampum was given to me by Chief Ogalalla; a famous Sioux warrior, he was. 'Twas back in sixty-wan, and the string was the worth of two ponies in thim days. Three of me mates an' meself was prospectin' down in western Nebraska. There came a great blizzard, and Chief Ogalalla and three of his men rode up to our camp, and we took them in for the night."

“And he gave you the wampum in payment?”

“Payment? Never! A man never paid for food nor shelter on the plains. No more than for the air he breathed. ’Twas gratitude. For Chief Ogalalla had a ragin’ toothache, and I cured it for him. Made him a poultice of red pepper.”

“Mercy! I should think that would hurt worse than any toothache!”

“Maybe it did, ma’am. But at least it distracted his attention from the tooth itself. That rattlesnake, I kilt in a swamp near Vicksburg. Me and me wife was young then, and we’d borrowed a skiff, an’ rowed out to hunt pond-lilies. Mary would go in the bog, walkin’ on the big tufts of rushes. Her little feet were that light she didn’t sink at all. But the first thing I heard she gave a little squeal, an’ there she stood, perched on a tuft, and not three feet away, curled up on a log, was that great shinin’ serpent. Just rockin’ himself easy, he was, makin’ ready to strike. An’ strike he would. Only”—the small twinkling face grew grim—“only I struck first.”

Marian shivered.

"And the little white glove?"

The old pilot beamed.

"Sure, I hoped ye'd notice that, miss. That glove points to the proud day f'r me! It was the summer of '60. I was pilotin' the *Annie Kilburn*, a grand large packet, down to Saint Louis. We had a wonderful party aboard her. 'Twas just the beginnin' of war times, an' 'twould be like readin' a history book aloud to tell ye their names. Did ever ye hear of the Little Giant?"

"Of Stephen A. Douglas, the famous orator? Why, yes, to be sure. Was he aboard?"

"Yes. A fine, pleasant-spoke gentleman he was, too. But 'tis not the Little Giant that this story is about. 'Twas his wife. Ye've heard of her, sure? Ah, but I wish you could have seen her when she came trippin' up the steps of me pilot-house and passed the time of day with me, so sweet and friendly. Afterward they told me what a great lady she was. Though I could see that for meself, she was that gentle, and her voice so quiet and low, and her look so sweet and kind. I was showin' her about, an' feelin' terrible proud, an' fussy, an' excited. I was a young felly then,

and it took no more than her word an' her smile to turn me foolish head. An' I was showin' her how to handle the wheel, and by some mischance, didn't I catch me blunderin' hand in the frame, an' give it a wrench that near broke every bone! I couldn't leave the wheel till the first mate should come to take me place. And Madame Douglas was that distressed, you'd think it was her own hand that she was grievin' over. She would tear her lace handkerchief into strips, and bind up the cut, and then what does she do but take her white glove, an' twist it round the fingers, so's to keep them from the air, till I could find time to bandage them. I said not a word. But the minute her silks an' laces went trailin' down the hurricane ladder, I jerked off that glove an' folded it in my wallet. An' there it stayed till I could have that frame made for it. And in that frame I've carried it ever since, all these long years.

"Those were the grand days, sure," he added, wistfully. "Before the war, we pilots were the lords of the river. I had me a pair of varnished boots, an' tight striped trousers, an' a grand shiny stove-pipe hat, an' I wouldn't have called the

king me uncle. It's sad times for the river, nowadays." He looked away up the broad, tumbling yellow stream. "Look at her, will ye! No river at all, she is, wid her roily yellow water, an' her poor miry banks, an' her bluffs, all washed away to shiftin' sand. But wasn't she the grand stream entirely, before the war!"

Marian looked at the framed river-chart above the wheel. She tried to read its puzzle of tangled lines. The old man sniffed.

"Don't waste yer time wid that gimcrack, miss. Steer by it? Never!" He shrugged his shoulders loftily. "It hangs there by government request, so I tolerate it to please the Department. I know this river by heart, every inch. I could steer this boat from Natchez to Saint Paul wid me eyes shut, the blackest night that ever blew!"

Marian dimpled at his majestic tone.

"Will you show me how to steer? I've always been curious as to how it is done."

"Certain I will."

Keenly interested, Marian gripped the hand-holds, and turned the heavy wheel back and forth as he directed. Suddenly her grasp loosened.

Down the stream, straight toward the boat, drifted a rolling black mass.

"Mercy, what is that? It looks like a whole forest of logs. It's rolling right toward us!"

"Ye're right. 'Tis a raft that's broke adrift. But we have time to dodge, be sure. Watch now."

His right hand grasped the wheel. His left seized the bell-cord. Three sharp toots signalled the engine-room for full head of steam. Instantly the *Lucy* jarred under Marian's feet with the sudden heavy force of doubled power. Slowly the steam-boat swung out of her course, in a long westward curve. Past her, the nearest logs not fifty feet away, the great, grinding mass of tree-trunks rolled and tumbled by, sweeping on toward the Gulf.

"'Tis handy that we met those gentlemen by daylight," remarked the pilot, cheerfully. "For one log alone would foul our paddle-wheels and give us a bad shaking up. And should all that Donnybrook Fair come stormin' into us by night, we'd go to the bottom before ye could say Jack Robinson."

Marian's eyes narrowed. She stared at the dusk stormy yellow river, the blank inhospitable shores. She was not by any means a coward. But she could not resist asking one question.

"Do we go on up-river after nightfall? Or do we stop at some landing?"

"There's no landing between here and Grafton, at the mouth of the Illinois River. We'll have to tie up along shore, I'm thinkin'." The old man spoke grudgingly. "If I was runnin' her meself, 'tis little we'd stop for the night. But the captain thinks different. He's young and notional. Tie up over night we must, says he. But 'tis all nonsense. Chicken-hearted, I'd call it, that's all."

Marian laughed to herself. Inwardly she was grateful for the captain's chicken-heartedness.

A loud gong sounded from below. The pilot nodded.

"Yon's your supper-bell, miss. I thank ye kindly for the pleasure of yer company. I shall be honored if ye choose to come again. And soon."

Marian made her way down to the cabin

through the stormy dusk. The little room was warm and brightly lighted; the captain's negro boy was just placing huge smoking-hot platters of perfectly cooked fish and steak upon the clean oil-cloth table. They gathered around it, an odd company. Marian and Roderick, the captain, the *Lucy's* engineer, a pleasant, boyish fellow, painfully embarrassed and redolent of hot oil and machinery; and two young dredge-runners, on their way, like Rod, to the Breckenridge contract. Save the captain and Rod, they gobbled bashfully, and fled at the earliest possible moment. Rod and the captain were talking of the contract and of its prospects. Marian trifled with her massive hot biscuit, and listened indifferently.

"I hope your coming on the work may change its luck, Mr. Hallowell," observed the captain. "For that contract has struggled with mighty serious difficulties, so far. Breckenridge himself is a superb engineer; but of course he cannot stay on the ground. He has a dozen equally important contracts to oversee. His engineers are all well enough, but somehow they don't seem to make things go. Carlisle is the chief. He is a good

engineer and a good fellow, but he is so nearly dead with malaria that he can't do two hours' work in a week. Burford, his aid, is a young Southerner, a fine chap, but—well, a bit hot-headed. You know our Northern labor won't stand for much of that. Then there is Marvin, who is third in charge. But as for Marvin"—he stopped, with a queer short laugh—"as for Marvin, the least said the soonest mended. He's a cub engineer, they call him; a grizzly cub at that. He may come out all right, with time. You can see for yourself that you haven't any soft job. With a force of two hundred laborers, marooned in a swamp seven miles from nowhere, not even a railroad in the county; with half the land-owners protesting against their assessments, and refusing to pay up; with your head engineer sick, and your coal shipments held up by high water—no, you won't find your place an easy one, mind that."

"I'm not doing any worrying." Rod's jaw set. His dark face glowed. Marian looked at him, a little jealously. His whole heart and thought were swinging away to this work, now opening

before him. This was his man's share in labor, and he was eager to cope with its sternest demands.

"Well, it's a good thing you have the pluck to face it. You will need all the pluck you've got, and then some." The captain paced restlessly up and down the narrow room. "Wonder why we don't slow down. We must be running a full twelve miles an hour. Altogether too fast, when we're towing a barge. And it is pitch dark."

He stooped to the engine-room speaking-tube. "Hi, Smith! Why are you carrying so much steam? I want to put her inshore."

A muffled voice rose from the engine-room.

"All right, sir. But McCloskey, he just rung for full speed ahead."

"He did? That's McCloskey, all over. The old rascal! He has set his heart on making Grafton Landing to-night, instead of tying up along-shore. Hear that? He's making that old wheel jump. To be sure, he knows the river channel like a book. But, even with double search-lights, no man living can see ice-cakes and brush far enough ahead to dodge them."

"Let's take a look on deck," suggested Rod.

Once outside the warm, cheerful cabin, the night wind swept down on them, a driving, freezing blast. The little steamer fairly raced through the water. Her deck boards quivered; the boom of the heavy engine throbbed under their feet.

"Thickest night I've seen in a year," growled the captain. "I say, McCloskey! Slow down, and let's put her inshore. This is too dangerous to suit me."

No reply. The boat fled pitching on.

"*McCloskey!*"

At last there came a faint hail.

"Yes, captain! What's yer pleasure, sir?"

"The old rascal! He's trying to show off. He's put his deaf ear to the tube, I'll be bound. Best go inside, Miss Hallowell, this wind is full of sleet. McCloskey! Head her inshore, I say."

On rushed the *Lucy*. Her course did not change a hair's breadth.

"No wonder they call him Commodore McCloskey!" Rod whispered wickedly. "Even the captain has to yield to him."

"McCloskey!" The captain's voice was gruff

with anger. "*Head her inshore!* Unless you're trying to kill the boat——"

Crash!

The captain's sentence was never finished.

CHAPTER III

ENTER MR. FINNEGAN

WITH that crash the floor shot from under their feet. Stumbling and clutching, the three, Marian, Rod, and the captain, pitched across the deck and landed in a heap against the rail. The lighted cabin seemed to rear straight up from the deck and lunge toward them. There was an uproar of shouts, a hideous pounding of machinery. Marian shut her eyes.

Then, with a second deafening crash, the steamer righted herself; and, thrown like three helpless ninepins, Marian, Rod, and the captain reeled back from the rail and found themselves, bumped and dizzy, tangled in a heap of freight and canvas. Rod was the first on his feet. He snatched Marian up, with a groan.

"Sister! Are you hurt? Tell me, quick."

"Nonsense, no." Marian struggled up, bruised and trembling. "I whacked my head on the rail, that's all. What has happened?"

"We've struck another bunch of runaway logs. They've fouled our wheel," shouted the captain. "Put this life-preserver on your sister. Swing out the yawl, boys!" For the deck crew was already scrambling up the stairs. "Here, where's Smith?"

"He's below, sir, stayin' by the boiler. The logs struck us for'ard the gangway. She's got a hole stove in her that you could drive an ice-wagon through," answered a fireman. "Smith says, head her inshore. Maybe you can beach her before she goes clean under."

The captain groaned.

"Her first trip for the year! The smartest little boat on the river! McCloskey!" he shouted angrily up the tube. "Head her inshore, before she's swamped. You hear that, I reckon?"

"Ay, ay, sir." It was a very meek voice down the tube.

Very slowly the *Lucy* swung about. Creaking and groaning, she headed through the darkness for the darker line of willows that masked the Illinois shore.

For a minute, Roderick and Marian stood together under the swaying lantern, too dazed by

excitement to move. On Marian's forehead a cheerful blue bump had begun to rise; while Rod's cheek-bone displayed an ugly bruise. Suddenly Marian spoke.

"Rod! Where is Empress! She will be frightened to death. We must take her into the yawl with us."

The young fireman turned.

"That grand big cat of yours, ma'am? You'll never coax a cat into an open boat. They'll die first. But have no fear. We are not a hundred yards from shore, and in shallow water at that. 'Tis a pity the *Lucy* is hurt, but it's fortunate for us that she can limp ashore."

Marian felt a little foolish. She pulled off the cork jacket which Rod had tied over her shoulders.

"We aren't shipwrecked after all, Rod. We're worse frightened than hurt."

"I'm not so sure of that. Keep that life-preserver on, Sis."

The *Lucy* was blundering pluckily toward shore. But the deck jarred with the thud and rattle of thrashing machinery, and at every forward plunge

the boat pitched until it seemed as if the next fling would surely capsize her.

Rod peered into the darkness.

"We'll make the shore, I do believe. Shall I leave you long enough to get our bags and Empress?"

"Oh, I'll go too. You'll need me to pacify Empress. She will be panic-stricken."

Poor Empress was panic-stricken, indeed. The little cabin was a chaos. The shock of the collision had overturned every piece of furniture. Even the wall cabinets were upset, and their shells and arrowheads were scattered far and wide. The beautiful old-time crystal chandeliers were in splinters. Worst, the big gilt mirror lay on the floor, smashed to atoms. Only one object in all that cabin held its place: the stuffed eagle. And high on the eagle's outspread wing, crouched like a panther, snarling and spitting, her every silky hair furiously on end, clung poor, terrified Empress. Rod exploded.

"You made friends with the nice bird, after all, didn't you, Empress! Come on down, kitty. Let me put a life-preserver on you too."

No life-preservers for Empress! Marian coaxed and called in vain. She merely dug her claws into the eagle's back and growled indignant refusal.

"Let's go back on deck, Sis. She'll calm down presently."

The *Lucy* was now working inshore with increasing speed. But, as they stepped on deck, the boat careened suddenly, then stopped, with a sickening jolt.

"Never mind, miss," the young fireman quickly assured her. "She has struck a sand-bar, and there she'll stick, I fear. But we are safe enough, for the water is barely six feet deep. We'll have to anchor here for the night, but don't be nervous. She can't sink very far in six feet of water."

"I suppose not." Yet Marian's teeth chattered. Inwardly she sympathized with Empress. What a comfort it would be to climb the stuffed eagle and perch there, well out of reach of even six feet of black icy water!

The captain was still more reassuring.

"Well, we're lucky that we've brought her this

near shore." He wiped his forehead with a rather unsteady hand. "Ten minutes ago my heart was in my mouth. I thought sure she'd sink in mid-stream. You're perfectly safe now, Miss Hallowell. Better go to your state-room and get some sleep."

"Yes, the *Lucy* will rest still as a church now," said the young fireman, with a heartening chuckle. "She's hard aground. Though that's no thanks to our pilot. I say, McCloskey! Where were you trying to steer us? Into a lumber-yard?"

Down the hurricane deck came Mr. McCloskey, white beard waving, eyes twinkling, jaunty and serene as a May morning.

"This little incident is no fault of me steerin'," said he, with delightful unconcern. "'Twas the carelessness of thim raftsmen, letting their logs get away, no less. Sure, captain dear, I'd sue them for damages."

"I'll be more likely to sue you for running full speed after dark, against orders," muttered the captain. Then he laughed. "I ought to put you in irons. But the man doesn't live that can hold a grudge against you, McCloskey. Take hold

now, boys. Bank your fires, then we'll patch her up as best we can for the night."

Marian went to her stateroom, but not to sleep. There was little sleep that night for anybody. In spite of protecting sand-bar and anchor, the boat careened wretchedly. Strange groans and shrieks rose from the engine-room; hurrying footsteps came and went through the narrow gangway. And the rush of the swift current, the bump of ice-cakes, and the sweep of floating brush past her window kept her aroused and trembling. It seemed years before the tiny window grew gray with dawn.

The captain's voice reached her ears.

"No, the *Lucy* isn't damaged as badly as we thought. But it will take us two days of bulk-heading before we dare go on. You'd best take your sister up to the camp in my launch. It is at your service."

"That's good news!" sighed Marian. "Anything to escape from this sinking ship. I don't like playing Casabianca one bit."

She swallowed the hot coffee and corn bread which the captain's boy brought to her door, and

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hurried on deck. Their embarking was highly exciting; for poor Empress, having been coaxed with difficulty from the eagle's roost, where she had spent the night, promptly lost her head at sight of the water and fled shrieking to the pilot-house. Rod, the pilot, the engineer, and the young fireman together hunted her from her fastness, and, after a wild chase, returned scratched but victorious, with Empress raging in a gunny-sack.

"Best keep her there till you're ashore, miss," laughed the young fireman. And Marian took the precaution to tie the mouth of the sack with double knots.

Up-stream puffed the launch, past Grafton Landing into the narrower but clearer current of the Illinois River. Now the black mud banks rose into bluffs and wooded hills. Here and there a marshy backwater showed a faint tinge of early green. But there was not a village in sight; not even a solitary farm-house. Hour after hour they steamed slowly up the dull river, beneath the gray mist-hooded sky. Marian looked resentfully at her brother. He had unrolled a portfolio of blue-

prints, and sat over them, as absorbed and as indifferent to the cold and discomfort as if he were sitting at his own desk at home.

"He's so rapt over his miserable old contract that he is not giving me one thought," Marian sulked to herself. "I just wish that I had put my foot down, and had refused, flatly, to come with him. If I had dreamed the West would be like this!"

Presently the launch whistled. An answering whistle came from up-stream. Rod dropped his blue-prints with a shout.

"Look, Marian. There is the contract camp, the whole plant! See, straight ahead!"

Marian stared. There was not a house to be seen; but high on the right bank stood an army of tents; and below, moored close to shore, lay a whole village of boats, strung in long double file. Midway stood a gigantic steam-dredge. Its vivid red-painted machinery reared high on its black, oil-soaked platform, its strange sprawling crane spread its iron wings, like the pinions of some vast ungainly bird of prey. Around it were ranked several flat-boats, a trim steam-launch, a whole

regiment of house-boats. Rod's eyes sparkled. He drew a sharp breath.

"This is my job, all right. Isn't it sumptuous, Marian! Will you look at that dredge! Isn't she magnificent? So is the whole outfit, barges and all. That's worth walking from Boston to see!"

"Is it?" Marian choked back the vicious little retort. "Well, I'd be willing to walk back to Boston—to get away!"

"Ahoy the launch! This is Mr. Hallowell?" A tall, haggard man in oilskins and hip boots came striding across the dredge. "Glad to see you, sir. We hoped that you would arrive to-day. I am Carlisle, the engineer in charge." He leaned over the rail to give Rod's hand a friendly grip. He spoke with a dry, formal manner, yet his lean yellow face was full of kindly interest. "And this is your sister, Miss Hallowell? You have come to a rather forlorn summer resort, Miss Hallowell, but we will do our best to make it endurable for you."

Roderick, red with pleasure, stood up to greet his new chief. Behind Mr. Carlisle towered a

broad-shouldered, heavily built young man, in very muddy khaki and leggings, his blond wind-burnt face shining with a hospitable grin.

"This is our Mr. Burford, Mr. Hallowell. At present, you and he will superintend the night shifts."

Mr. Burford gave Roderick a hearty handshake, and beamed upon Marian.

"Mr. Burford will be particularly glad to welcome you, Miss Hallowell, on Mrs. Burford's account. She has been living here on the work for several months, the only lady who has graced our camp until to-day. I know that she will be eager for your companionship."

Mr. Burford grew fairly radiant.

"Sally Lou will be wild when she learns that you are really here," he declared eagerly, in his deep southern drawl. "She has talked of your coming every minute since the news came that we might hope to have you with us. You will find us a mighty primitive set, but you and Sally Lou can have plenty of fun together, I know. I'd like to bring her and the kiddies to see you as soon as you feel equal to receiving us."

"Thank you very much." Marian tried her best to be gracious and friendly. But she was so tired that young Burford's broad smiling face seemed to blur and waver through a thickening mist. "I'm sure I shall be charmed——"

"Hi, there!" An angry shout broke upon her words. "Mr. Carlisle, will you look here! That foreman of yours has gone off with my skiff again. If I'm obliged to share my boat with your impudent riffraff——"

"Mr. Marvin, will you kindly come here a moment?" The chief's voice did not lose its even tone; but his heavy brows narrowed. "I wish you to meet Mr. Hollowell, who is your and Mr. Burford's new associate. Miss Hollowell, may I present Mr. Marvin?"

Marian bowed and looked curiously at the tall, dark-featured young man who shuffled forward. She remembered the captain's terse description—"a cub engineer, and a grizzly cub at that." Mr. Marvin certainly acted the part. He barely nodded to her and to Roderick, then clamored on with his grievance.

"You know I've told the men time and again

to leave my boat alone. But your foreman borrows my launch whenever he takes the notion, and leaves her half-swamped, or high and dry, as he chooses. If you won't jack him up for it, I will. I'll not tolerate——”

“I'll take that matter up later, Mr. Marvin.” Marvin's sullen face reddened at the tone in his chief's voice. “Mr. Hallowell, I have found lodgings for your sister three miles up the canal, at the Gates farm. Mr. Burford will take you to Gates's Landing, thence you will drive to the farmhouse. Your own quarters will be on the engineers' house-boat, and we shall hope to see you here for dinner to-night. Good-by, Miss Hallowell. I hope that Mrs. Gates will do everything to make you comfortable.”

The launch puffed away up the narrow muddy canal. It was a straight, deep stream of brown water, barely forty feet wide. Its banks were a high-piled mass of mire and clay, for the levee-builders had not yet begun work. Beyond rose clumps of leafless trees. Then, far as eye could see, muddy fields and gray swampy meadows. Rod gazed, radiant.

"Isn't it splendid, Marian! The finest equipment I ever dreamed of. Look at those barges!"

"Those horrid flat-boats heaped with coal?"

"Yes. Think of the yardage record we're making. Five thousand yards a day!"

Marian rubbed her aching eyes.

"I don't know a yardage record from a bushel basket," she sighed. "What is that queer box-shaped red boat, set on a floating platform?"

"That is the engineers' house-boat, where your brother is to live. Mayn't we take you aboard to see?" urged Burford.

Marian stepped on the narrow platform and peered into the cubby-hole state-rooms and the clean, scoured mess-room. She was too tired to be really interested.

"And that funny, grass-green cabin, set on wooden stilts, up that little hill—that play-house?"

Burford laughed.

"That's my play-house. Sally Lou insists on living right here, so that she and the babies and Mammy Easter can keep a watchful eye on me. You and Sally Lou will be regular chums, I know.

She is not more than a year or so older than you are, and it has been pretty rough on her to leave her home and come down here. But she says she doesn't care; that she'd rather rough it down here with me than mope around home, back in Norfolk, without me. It surely is a splendid scheme for me to have her here." He laughed again, with shy, boyish pride. "Sally Lou is a pretty plucky sort. And, if I may say it, so are you."

Marian managed to smile her thanks. Inwardly she was hoping that the marvellous Sally Lou would stay away and leave her in peace. She was trembling with fatigue. Through the rest of the trip she hardly spoke.

At Gates's Landing they were met by a solemn, bashful youth and a buckboard drawn by two raw, excited horses. They whirled and bumped through a rutted woods road and stopped at last before a low white farm-house. Marian realized dimly that Rod was carrying her upstairs and into a small tidy room. She was so utterly tired that she dropped on the bed and slept straight through the day.

She did not waken until her landlady's tap called

her to supper. Mr. and Mrs. Gates, two quiet, elderly people, greeted her kindly, and set a Homeric feast before her: shortbread and honey, broiled squirrels and pigeon stew, persimmon jam and hot mince pie. She ate dutifully, then crept back to her little room, with its mournful hair wreaths and its yellowed engravings of "Night and Morning" and "The Death-bed of Washington," and fell asleep again.

The three days that followed were like a queer, tired dream. It rained night and day. The roads were mired hub deep. Roderick could not drive over to see her, but he telephoned to her daily. But his hasty messages were little satisfaction. The heavy rains had overflowed the big ditch, he told her. That meant extra work for everybody on the plant. Carlisle was wretchedly sick, so Rod and Burford were sharing their chief's watch in addition to their own duties. Worst, Marvin had quarrelled with the head runner of the big dredge, and "We're having to spend half our time in coddling them both for fear they'll walk off and leave us," as Rod put it. In short, Roderick had neither time nor thought for his sister.

Marian realized that her brother was not inconsiderate. He was absorbed in his work and in its risks. Yet she keenly resented her loneliness.

"It isn't Rod's fault. But if I had dreamed that the West would be like this!"

But on the fourth day, while she sat at her window looking out at the endless rain, there came a surprising diversion.

"A gentleman to see you, Miss Hallowell. Will you come downstairs?"

"Why, Commodore McCloskey!" Marian hurried down, delighted. "How good of you to come!"

Commodore McCloskey, dripping from his sou'wester to his mired boots, beamed like a drenched but cheery Santa Claus.

"I've taken the liberty to bring a friend to call," he chuckled. "He's young an' green, an' 'tis few manners he owns, but he's good stock, an'—Here, ye rascal! Shame on ye, startin' a fight the minute ye enter the house!"

Marian gasped. Past her, with a wild miauw, shot a yellow streak. That streak was Empress. Straight after the streak flew a fat, brown, curly

object, yapping at the top of its powerful lungs. Up the window-curtain scrambled Empress. With a frantic leap she landed on the frame of Grandpa Gates's large crayon portrait. Beneath the portrait her curly pursuer yelped and whined.

"Why, he's a collie puppy. Oh, what a beauty! What is his name?"

"Beauty he is. And his name is Finnegan, after the poem, 'Off again, on again, gone again, Finnegan.' Do ye remember? 'Tis him to the life. He is a prisint to ye from Missis McCloskey and meself. An' our compliments an' good wishes go wid him!"

"How more than kind of you!" Marian, delighted, stooped to pat her new treasure. Finnegan promptly leaped on her and splattered her fresh dress with eager, muddy paws. He then caught the table-cover in his teeth. With one frisky bounce he brought a shower of books and magazines to the floor. Mr. McCloskey clutched for his collar. The puppy gayly eluded him and made a dash for the pantry. Marian caught him just as he was diving headlong into the open flour-barrel.

"I do thank you so much! He'll be such a pleasure; and such a protection," gasped Marian, snatching Mrs. Gates's knitting work from the puppy's inquiring paws.

"'Tis hardly a protector I'd call him," Mr. McCloskey returned. "But he'll sure keep your mind employed some. Good-day to ye, ma'am. And good luck with Finnegan."

Poor Empress! In her delight with this new plaything, Marian quite forgot her elder companion. Moreover, as Mr. McCloskey had said, Finnegan could and did keep her mind employed, and her hands as well.

"That pup is energetic enough, but he don't appear to have much judgment," said Mrs. Gates, mildly. In two hours Finnegan had carried off the family supply of rubbers and hid them in the corn-crib; he had torn up one of Rod's blue-prints; he had terrorized the hen-yard; he had chased Empress from turret to foundation-stone. At length Empress had turned on him and cuffed him till he yelped and fled to the kitchen, where he upset a pan of bread sponge.

"Suppose you take him for a walk, down to

the big ditch. Maybe the fresh air will calm him down."

Marian made a leash of clothes-line and marched Finnegan down the sodden woods toward the ditch. She was so busy laughing at his droll performances that she quite forgot the dull fields, the wet, gray prospect. Crimson-cheeked and breathless, she finally dragged him from the third alluring rabbit-hole, despite his pleading whines, and started back up the canal. As she pushed through a hedge of willows a sweet, high, laughing voice accosted her.

"Good-morning, my haughty lady! Won't you stop and talk with us a while?"

Startled, Marian turned toward the call. Across the ditch, high on the opposite bank, stood the quaintest, prettiest group that her eyes had ever beheld. A tall, fair-haired girl of her own age, dressed in a bewitching short-waisted gown of scarlet and a frilly scarlet bonnet, stood in the leafless willows, a tiny white-clad child in her arms. Behind her a stout beaming negress in bandanna turban and gay plaid calico was lifting another baby high on her ample shoulder.

Marian stared, astonished. The whole group might well have stepped straight out of some captivating old engraving of the days before the war.

“Haven’t you time to pass the time o’ day?” the sweet, mischievous voice entreated. “You are Miss Hallowell, I know. I’m Sarah Louisiana Burford, and I am just perishin’ to meet you. There is a board bridge just a rod or so up the canal. We’ll meet you there. Do please come, and bring your delightful dog. March right along now!”

And Marian, laughing with amusement and delight, marched obediently along.

CHAPTER IV

THE MARTIN-BOX NEIGHBORS

MARIAN picked her way up the shore to the board bridge, with Finnegan prancing behind her. She felt a little abashed as she remembered her rather tart indifference to young Burford's cordial invitation of the week before. But all her embarrassment melted away as she crossed the little bridge and met Sally Lou's welcoming face, her warm clasping hands.

"You don't know how hungry I have been to see you," vowed Sally Lou, her brown eyes kindling under the scarlet bonnet.

"We've been counting the hours till we should dare to go to call on Miss Northerner, haven't we, kiddies? This is my son, Edward Fairfax Burford, Junior, Miss Hallowell. Three years old, three feet square, and weighs forty-one pounds. Isn't he rather gorgeous—if he does belong to me! And this is Thomas Tucker Burford. Eighteen

months old, twenty-six pounds, and the disposition of an angel, as long as he gets his own way. And this is Mammy Easter, who came all the way from Norfolk with me, to take care of the babies, so that I could live here on the contract with Ned. Wasn't she brave to come out to this cold, lonesome country all for me? And this martin-box is my house, and it is anxious to meet you, too, so come right in!"

Marian climbed the high, narrow outside steps that led to the tiny play-house on stilts, and entered the low, red doorway, feeling as if she had climbed Jack's bean-stalk into fairyland. Inside, the martin-box was even more fascinating. It boasted just three rooms. The largest room, gay with Mother Goose wall-paper and rosy chintz, was obviously the realm of Edward, Junior, and Thomas Tucker. The next room, with its cunning miniature fireplace, its shelves of books, its pictures and photographs, and its broad high-piled desk, was their parents' abode; while the third room boasted fascinating white-painted cupboards and sink, a tiny alcohol stove, and a wee table daintily set.

"Aren't you shocked at folks that eat in their kitchen?" drawled Sally Lou, observing Marian with dancing eyes. "But all our baking and heavy cooking is done for us, over on the quarter-boat. I brought the stove to heat the babies' milk; and, too, I like to fuss up goodies for Ned when he is tired or worried. Poor boys! They're having such an exasperating time with the contract this week! Everything seems possessed to go awry. We'll have to see to it that they get a lot of coddling so's to keep them cheered up, won't we?"

"Why, I—I suppose so. But how did you dare to bring your little children down here? They say that this is the most malarial district in the State."

"I know. But they can't catch malaria until May, when the mosquitoes come. Then I shall send them to a farm, back in the higher land. Mammy will take care of them; and I'll stay down here with Ned during the day and go to the babies at night. They're pretty sturdy little tads. They are not likely to catch anything unless their mother is careless with them. And she isn't careless, really. Is she, Tom Tucker?" She snatched up her youngest son, with a hug that

made his fat ribs creak. "Come, now! Let's brew some stylish afternoon tea for the lady. Get down the caravan tea that father sent us, Mammy, and the preserved ginger, and my Georgian spoons. And fix some chicken bones on the stoop for Miss Northerner's puppy. This is going to be a banquet, and a right frabjous one, too!"

It was a banquet, and a frabjous one, Marian agreed. Sally Lou's tea and Mammy's nut-cakes were delicious beyond words. The bright little house, the dainty service, Sally Lou's charming gay talk, the babies, clinging wide-eyed and adorable to her knee, all warmed and heartened Marian's listless soul. She was ravished with everything. She looked in wonder and delight at the high sleeping-porch, with its double mosquito bars and its duck screening and its cosey hammock-beds. ("Ned sleeps so much better here, where it is quiet, than on that noisy boat," Sally Lou explained.) She gazed with deep respect at the tiny pantry, built of soap-boxes, lined with snowy oil-cloth. She marvelled at the exquisite old silver, the fine embroidered table-

linen, the delicate china. And she caught her breath when her eyes lighted upon the beautiful painting in oils that hung above young Burford's desk. It was a magical bit of color: a dreamy Italian garden, walled in ancient carved and mellowed stone, its slopes and borders a glory of roses, flaunting in splendid bloom; and past its flowery gates, a glimpse of blue, calm sea. She could hardly turn her eyes away from the lovely vista. It was as restful as an April breeze. And across the lower corner she read the clear tracing of the signature, a world-famous name.

Sally Lou followed her glance.

"You surely think I'm a goose, don't you, to bring my gold teaspoons, and my wedding linen, and my finest tea-set down to a wilderness like this? Well, perhaps I am. And yet the very best treasures that we own are none too good for our home, you know. And this *is* home. Any place is home when Ned and the babies and I are together. Besides, the very fact that this place is so queer and ugly and dismal is the best of reasons why we need all our prettiest things, and need to use them every day, don't you see? So I picked

out my sacrest treasures to bring along. And that painting—yes, it was running a risk to bring so valuable a canvas down here. But doesn't it just rest your heart to look at it? That is why I wanted it with us every minute. You can look at that blue sleepy sky, and those roses climbing the garden wall, and the sea below, and forget all about the noisy, grimy boats, and the mud, and sleet, and malaria, and the cross laborers, and the broken machinery, and everything else; and just look, and look, and dream. That is why I carted it along. Especially on Ned's account, don't you see?"

"Y-yes." At last Marian took her wistful eyes from the picture. "I wish that I had thought to bring some good photographs to hang in Rod's state-room. I never thought. But there is no room to pin up even a picture post-card in his cubby-hole on the boat. I must go on now. I have had a beautiful time."

"There goes your brother this minute! In that little red launch, see? He is going up the ditch. Ring the dinner-bell, Mammy, that will stop him. He can take you and your dog up to Gates's

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Landing and save you half an hour's muddy walk."

Mammy's dinner-bell pealed loud alarm. Rod-erick heard and swung the boat right-about. His sober, anxious face lighted as Marian and Sally Lou gayly hailed him.

"I'm glad that you've met Mrs. Burford," he said, as he helped Marian aboard and hoisted Finnegan astern with some difficulty and many yelps; for Finnegan left his chicken-bones only under forcible urging. "She is just about the best ever, and I hope you two will be regular chums."

"I love her this minute," declared Marian, with enthusiasm. "Where are you bound, Rod? Mayn't Finnegan and I tag along?"

Rod's face grew worried.

"I'm bound upon a mighty ticklish cruise, Sis. It is a ridiculous cruise, too. Do you remember what I told you last week about the law that governs the taxing of the land-owners for the making of these ditches?"

"Yes. You said that when the majority of the land-owners had agreed on doing the drainage

work, then the law made every owner pay his tax, in proportion to the acreage of his land which would be drained by the ditches, whether he himself wanted the drainage done or not. And you said that some of the farmers did not want the ditches dug, and that they were holding back their payments and making trouble for the contractors; while others were making still more trouble by blocking the right of way and refusing to let the dredges cut through their land. But how can they hold you back, Rod? The law says that all the district people must share in the drainage expenses, whether they like to or not, because the majority of their neighbors have agreed upon it."

"The law says exactly that. Yes. But there are a lot of kinks to drainage law, and the farmers know it. Burford says that two or three of them have been making things lively for the company from the start. But just now we have only one troublesome customer to deal with. And she is a woman, that is the worst of it. She is a well-to-do, eccentric old lady, who owns a splendid farm, just beyond the Gateses. She paid her drainage assessment willingly enough. But now she says

that, last fall, the boys who made the survey tramped through her watermelon-field and broke some vines and sneaked off with three melons. At least, so she indignantly states. Maybe it is so; although the boys swear it was a pumpkin-field, and that they didn't steal so much as a jack-o'-lantern. Furthermore, she has put up barb wire and trespass notices straight across the contract right of way; and she has sent us notice that she is guarding that right of way with a gun, and that the first engineer who pokes his nose across her boundary line is due to receive a full charge of buckshot. Sort of a shot-gun quarantine, see? Now we must start dredging the lateral that crosses her land next Monday, at the latest. It must be done at the present stage of high water, else we'll have to delay dredging it until fall. Carlisle planned to call on her to-day, and to mollify her if possible, but he's too sick. So I must elbow in myself, and see what my shirt-sleeve diplomacy can do. I'm glad that I can take you along. Perhaps you can help to thaw her out."

"Of all the weird calls to make! What is the old lady like, Rod?"

"Burford says that she is a droll character. She has managed her own farm for forty years, and has made a fine success of it. Her name is Mrs. Chrisenberry. She is not educated, but she is very capable, and very kind-hearted when you once get on the right side of her. Yonder is her landing. Don't look so scared, Sis. She won't eat you."

Marian's fear dissolved in giggles as they teetered up the narrow board walk to the low brick farm-house. They could not find a door-bell; they rapped and pounded until their knuckles ached. Finnegan yapped helpfully and chewed the husk door-mat. At last, a forbidding voice sounded from the rear of the house.

"You needn't bang my door down. Come round to the dryin' yard, unless you're agents. If you're agents, you needn't come at all. I'm busy."

Meekly Rod and Marian followed this hospitable summons.

Across the muddy drying yard stretched rows of clothes-line, fluttering white. Beside a heaped basket of wet, snowy linen stood a very short,

very stout little old lady, her thick woollen skirts tucked up under a spotless white apron, her small nut-cracker face glowering from under a sun-bonnet almost as large as herself. She took three clothes-pins from her mouth and scowled at Rod.

"Well!" said she. "Name your business. But I don't want no graphophones, nor patent chick-feed, nor golden-oak dinin'-room sets, nor Gems of Poesy with gilt edges. Mind that."

Marian choked. Rod knew that choke. Tears of strangling laughter stood in his eyes as he humbly stuttered his errand.

"W-we engineers of the Breckenridge Company wish to offer our sincere apologies for any annoyance that our surveyors may have caused you. We are anxious to make any reparation that we can. And—er— We find ourselves obliged, on account of the high water, to cut our east laterals at once. We will be very grateful to you if you will be so kind as to overlook our trespasses of last season, and will permit us to go on with our work. I speak for the company as well as for myself."

The old lady stared at him, with unwinking, beady eyes. There was a painful pause.

"Well, I don't know. You're a powerful slick, soft-spoken young man. I'll say that much for you." Marian gulped, and stooped hurriedly to pat Finnegan. "And I don't know as I have any lastin' gredge against your company. Them melons was frost-bit, anyway. But if you do start your machinery on that lateral, mind I don't want no more tamperin' with my garden stuff. And I don't want your men a-cavortin' around, runnin' races on my land, nor larkin' evenings, nor comin' to the house for drinks of water. One of them surveyors, last fall, he come to the door for a drink, an' I was fryin' crullers, an' he asked for one, bold as brass. Says I, 'Help yourself.' Well, he did that. There was a blue platter brim full, and if he didn't set down an' eat every single cruller, down to the last crumb! An' then he had the impudence to tell me to my face that they was tolerable good crullers, but that he'd wager the next platterful would taste better than the first, an' he'd like to try and find out for sure!"

"I don't blame him. I'd like to try that experiment myself," said Rod serenely. The old lady

glared. Then the ghost of a twinkle flickered under the vasty sun-bonnet.

"Well, as I say, I ain't made up my mind yet. But I'll let you know to-night, maybe. Now you'd better be goin'. Looks like more rain."

"Can't we help you with the clothes first?" asked Marian. The old lady shook out a huge, wet table-cloth and stood on tip-toe to pin it carefully on the line.

"You might, yes. Take these pillow-cases. But don't you drop them in the mud. My clothes-line broke down last week, and didn't I spend a day of it, doin' my whole week's wash over again!"

The strong breeze caught the big cloth and whipped it like a banner. Finnegan, who had been waiting politely in the background, beheld this signal with joy. With a gay yelp he bolted past Marian and seized a corner of the table-cloth in his teeth.

"Scat!" cried Mrs. Chrisenberry, startled. "Where did that pup come from? Shoo!"

Finnegan, unheeding, took a tighter grip, and swung his fat heavy body from the ground. There

was a sickening sound of tearing linen. Marian stood transfixed. Rod, his arms full of wet pillow-slips, dashed to the rescue. But he was not in time.

"Scat, I say!" Mrs. Chrisenberry flapped her apron.

Amiable creature, she wanted to play with him! Enchanted, the puppy let go the table-cloth and dashed at her, under full steam. His sturdy paws struck Mrs. Chrisenberry with the force of a young battering-ram. With an astonished shriek she swayed back, clutching at the table-cloth to steady herself. But the table-cloth and clothespins could not hold a moment against the onslaught of the heavy puppy. By good fortune, the basketful of clothes stood directly behind Mrs. Chrisenberry. As the faithless table-cloth slid from the rope, back she pitched, with a terrified squeal, to land, safely if forcibly, in its snowy depths.

Marian, quite past speech, sank on the porch steps. Rod stood gaping with horror. Mrs. Chrisenberry rose up with appalling calm.

"You! You come here. You—varmint!"

Finnegan did not hesitate. Trustfully he gam-

bolled up; gayly he seized her apron hem in his white milk teeth and bit out a feather-stitched scallop. Mrs. Chrisenberry stooped. Her broad palm landed heavily on Finnegan's curly ear.

Alas for discipline! Finnegan dodged back and eyed her, amazed. One grieved yelp rent the air. Then, instantly repenting, he leaped upon her and smothered her with muddy kisses. This was merely the lady's way of playing with him. How could he resent it!

Then Rod came to his wits. He seized Mr. Finnegan by the collar and cuffed him into bewildered silence. He caught up the wrecked tablecloth and the miry pillow-slips, he poured out regrets and apologies and promises in an all but tearful stream. Mrs. Chrisenberry did not say one word. Her small nut-cracker face set, ominous.

"You needn't waste no more soft sawder," said she, at length. "I 'low these are just the ram-pagin' doings I could look for every day if I once gave you folks permission to bring your dredge on my land. So I may's well make up my mind right now. Tell your boss that those trespass signs an' that barb wire are still up, and that

they'll most likely stay up till doomsday. Good-mornin'."

"Well! I don't give much for my shirt-sleeve diplomacy," groaned Rod, as they teetered away, down the board walk.

"I'm sorry, Rod." Then Marian choked again. Weak with laughter, she clung to the gate-post. "It was j-just like a moving picture! And when she vanished into the basket— Oh, dear—oh, dear!"

"You better believe it was exactly like a moving picture," muttered Rod. "It all went so fast I couldn't get there in time to do one thing. It went like a cinematograph— Zip! And off flew all our chances for all time. Finnegan, you scoundrel! Do you realize that your playful little game will cost the company a lawsuit and a small fortune besides?"

Finnegan barked and took a friendly nip of Rod's ankle. Finnegan's young conscience was crystal-clear.

"Let's take the launch down to Burford's and tell them our misfortunes," said Rod. "I need sympathy."

The Burfords heard their mournful tale with shouts of unpitying joy.

"Yes, I know, it's hard luck. Especially with Marvin in the sulks and Carlisle sick," said Ned Burford, wiping his eyes. "But the next time you start diplomatic negotiations, you had better leave that dog at home. I'm going over to the house-boat to tell Mr. Carlisle. Poor sick fellow, this story will amuse him if anything can."

He jumped into the launch. A minute later Rod brought it alongside the house-boat and Burford disappeared within.

"Mr. Carlisle, sir!" They heard his laughing voice at the chief's state-room door. "May I come in? Will I disturb you if I tell you a good joke on Hallowell?"

There was a pause. Then came a rush of feet. Burford dashed from the cabin and confronted Rod and Marion. His face was very white.

"Hallowell! Come aboard, quick!" he said, in a shaking voice. "Mr. Carlisle is terribly ill. He's lying there looking like death; he couldn't even speak to me. Hurry!"

CHAPTER V

GOOSE-GREASE AND DIPLOMACY

RODERICK leaped aboard. Marian followed, trembling with fear.

Mr. Carlisle lay in his seaman's hammock beside the window. His gaunt hands were like ice. His lean face was ashen gray. But he nodded weakly and put out a shaking, courteous hand.

"Too bad to alarm you thus," he gasped. "I—I was afraid of this. Malaria plays ugly tricks with a man's heart now and then. You'd better ship me to the hospital at Saint Louis. They can patch me up in a week probably. Only, the sooner you can get me there, the better."

"You call the foreman and tell him to get up steam on the big launch, Hallowell." Burford, very pale, took command of the situation. "Miss Hallowell, will you go and bring Sally Lou? I want her right away. She's all kinds of good in an emergency."

Marian fled, her own heart pounding in her throat. But Sally Lou, after the first scared questions, rose to the occasion, steady and serene.

"Light the stove and make our soapstones and sand-bags piping-hot, Mammy. Heat some bouillon and put it into the thermos bottle. Ned, you and the foreman must take him down to Grafton Landing on the launch. The *Lucy Lee* is due to reach Grafton late this afternoon. I'll catch the *Lucy's* captain on the long-distance telephone at the landing above Grafton, and tell him to wait at Grafton Landing till you get there with Mr. Carlisle. Then you can put him aboard the *Lucy*. She will make Saint Louis in half the time that you could make it with the launch. Besides, the *Lucy* will mean far easier travelling for Mr. Carlisle."

"I never thought of the *Lucy*! I'd meant to wait with him at the Landing and take the midnight train. But the steam-boat will be a far easier trip. Sally Lou, you certainly are a peach!" Young Burford looked at his wife with solemn admiration. "Go and telephone, quick. We'll have Carlisle ready to start in an hour."

In less than an hour the launch was made ready, with cot and pillows and curtains, as like an ambulance as a launch could well be. With clumsy anxious pains Roderick and Burford lifted their chief aboard. Marian hung behind, eager to help, yet too frightened and nervous to be of service. But Sally Lou, her yellow hair flying under her ruffly red bonnet, her baby laughing and crowing on her shoulder, popped her flushed face gayly under the awning to bid Mr. Carlisle good-by.

"If it wasn't for these babies I'd go straight along and take care of you myself, Mr. Carlisle," she cried. "But the hospital will take better care of you than I could, I reckon. And the week's vacation will do you no end of good. Besides it will set these two lazybones to work." She gave her husband a gentle shake. "Ned and Mr. Hallowell will have to depend on themselves, instead of leaving all the responsibility to you. It will be the making of them. You'll see!"

"Perhaps that is true." Carlisle's gray lips smiled. He was white with suffering, but he spoke with his unvarying kind formality. "I am leaving you gentlemen with a pretty heavy load.

But—I am not apprehensive. I know that you boys will stand up to the contract, and that you will carry it on with success. Good-by, and good luck to you!”

The launch shot away down-stream. Sally Lou looked after it. Marian saw her sparkling eyes grow very grave.

“Mr. Carlisle is mighty brave, isn’t he? But he will not come back to work in a week’s time. No, nor in a month’s time either if I know anything about it. But there’s no use a-glooming, is there, Thomas Tucker! You two come up to my house and we’ll have supper together and watch for Ned; for if he meets the *Lucy* at Grafton he can bring the launch back by ten to-night.”

Sally Lou was a good prophet. It was barely nine when Ned’s launch whistled at the landing. Ned climbed the steps, looking tired and excited.

“Yes, we overhauled the *Lucy*, all right. Mr. Carlisle seemed much more comfortable when we put him aboard. He joked me about being so frightened and said he’d come back in a day or so

as good as new. But—I don't know how we'll manage here. With Carlisle laid up, and Marvin gone off in the sulks, for nobody knows how long—Well, for the next few days this contract is up to us, Hallowell. That is all there is to that. And we've got to make good. We've got to put it through."

"You certainly must make good. And it is up to us girls to help things along," said Sally Lou, briskly. "Isn't it, Marian? Yes, I'm going to call you Marian right away. It's such a saving of time compared to 'Miss Hallowell.' And the very first thing to-morrow morning we will drive over to Mrs. Chrisenberry's, and coax her into letting you boys start that lateral through her land."

Three startled faces turned to her. Three astounded voices rose.

"Coax her, indeed! On my word! When she drove Rod and me off the place this very morning!"

"Think you dare ask her to take down her barb-wire barricade and lay away her shot-gun? 'Not till doomsday!'"

"Sally Lou, are you daft? You've never laid eyes on Mrs. Chrisenberry. You don't know what you're tackling. We'll not put that lateral through till we've dragged the whole question through the courts. Don't waste your time in dreaming, child."

"I'm not going to dream. I'm going to act. You'll go with me, won't you, Marian? We'll take the babies and the buckboard. But, if you don't mind, we'll leave Mr. Finnegan at home. Finnegan's diplomacy is all right, only that it's a trifle demonstrative. Yes, you boys are welcome to shake your heads and look owlish. But wait and see!"

"She'll never try to face that ferocious old lady," said Rod, on the way home.

"Of course not. She's just making believe," rejoined Marian.

Little did they know Sally Lou! Marian had just finished her breakfast the next morning when the yellow buckboard, drawn by a solemn, scraggy horse, drove up to Mrs. Gates's door. On the front seat, rosy as her scarlet gown and cloak, sat Sally Lou. From the back seat beamed Mammy

Easter, in her gayest bandanna, with Edward Burford, Junior, dimpled and irresistible, beside her, and Thomas Tucker bouncing and crowing in her arms.

"Climb right in, Miss Northerner! Good-by, poor Finnegan! This time we're going to try the persuasive powers of two babies as compared to those of one collie. Here we go!"

"Are we really going to Mrs. Chrisenberry's? Are you actually planning to ask her for the right of way?" queried Marian.

Sally Lou chuckled. Her round face was guileless and bland.

"Certainly not. I am going to Mrs. Chrisenberry's to buy some goose-grease."

"To buy some *goose-grease*? Horrors! What is goose-grease, pray?"

"Goose-grease is goose-grease. Didn't you ever have the croup when you were young, Miss Northerner? And didn't they roll you in warm blankets, and then bandage your poor little throat with goose-grease and camphor and red pepper?"

"An' a baked onion for your supper," added Mammy Easter. "An' a big saucer of butter-

scotch, sizzlin'-hot. Dey ain't no croup what kin stand before dat!"

"Mercy, I should hope not. I never heard of anything so dreadful. You aren't going to give goose-grease to your own babies, I hope?"

Sally Lou surveyed her uproarious sons, and allowed herself a brief giggle.

"They've never had a sign of croup so far, I'm thankful to say. But one ought to be prepared. And Mrs. Chrisenberry has the finest poultry-yard in the country-side. We'll enjoy seeing that, too. Don't look so dubersome. Wait and see!"

Mrs. Chrisenberry was working in her vegetable garden as they drove up. Her queer little face was bound in a huge many-colored "nuby," her short skirts were kilted over high rubber boots. She leaned on her spade and gave the girls a nod that, as Marian told Rod later, was like a twelve-pound shot squarely across the enemy's bows.

Sally Lou merely beamed upon her.

"Wet weather for putting in your garden, isn't it?" she cried, gayly. "I'm Mrs. Burford, Mrs.

Chrisenberry. My husband is an engineer on the Breckenridge contract."

"H'm!" Mrs. Chrisenberry glared. Sally Lou chattered gayly on.

"I'm staying down at the canal with these two youngsters, and I want to buy some of your fine goose-grease. They've never had croup in all their born days, but it's such a cold, wet spring that it is well to be prepared for anything."

"Goose-grease!" Mrs. Chrisenberry looked at her keenly. "For those babies? Highty-tighty! Goose-grease is well enough, but hot mutton taller is better yet. I've raised two just as fine boys as them, so I know. Mutton taller an' camphire, that's sovereign."

She put down her spade and picked her way to the buckboard. Edward Junior hailed her with a shriek of welcome. Thomas Tucker floundered wildly in Mammy's grasp and clutched Mrs. Chrisenberry around the neck with a strangling squeeze.

Marian gasped. For Mrs. Chrisenberry, grim, stern little nut-cracker lady, had lifted Thomas to her stooped little shoulder and was gathering

Edward Junior into a lean strong little arm. Both babies crowed with satisfaction. Thomas jerked off the tasselled nuby and showered rose-leaf kisses from Mrs. Chrisenberry's tight knob of gray hair to the tip of her dour little chin. Edward pounded her gleefully with fists and feet.

"They'll strangle her," Marian whispered, aghast.

"Pooh, she doesn't mind," Sally Lou whispered back. "You mustn't let them pull you to pieces, Mrs. Chrisenberry. They're as strong as little bear cubs."

"Guess I know that." Mrs. Chrisenberry shook Edward's fat grip loose from her tatting collar. "They're the living images of my own boys, thirty years ago. I hope your children bring you as good luck as mine have brought me. They've grown up as fine men as you'd find in a day's journey. Let me take 'em to see the hen yard. They'll like to play with the little chickens, I know."

Edward and Thomas Tucker were charmed with the hen yard. They fell upon a brood of tiny yellow balls with cries of ecstasy. Only the irate

pecks and squawks of the outraged hen mother prevented them from hugging the fuzzy peepers to a loving death.

"They're a pretty lively team," remarked Mrs. Chrisenberry. "Let's take 'em into the house, and I'll give them some cookies and milk. I don't know much about new-fangled ways of feeding children, but I do know that my cookies never hurt anybody yet."

She led them through her shining kitchen into a big, bright sitting-room. Again Marian halted to stare. This was not the customary chill and dreary farm-house "parlor." Instead, she saw a wide, fire-lit living-room, filled with flowering plants, home-like with its books and pictures; and at the arched bay-window a beautiful upright piano.

Mrs. Chrisenberry followed her glance.

"Land, I don't ever touch it," she said, with a dry little nut-cracker chuckle. "My oldest boy he gave it to me, for he knows I'm that hungry for music, and whenever my daughter-in-law comes to visit she plays for me by the hour, and it's something grand. And now and then a neighbor

will pick out a tune for me. My, don't I wish I could keep it goin' all the time! You girls don't play, I suppose?"

Sally Lou's eyes met Marian's with a quick question. Marian's cheeks grew hot.

"I—I play a little. But I'm sure that Mrs. Burford——"

"Mrs. Burford will play some other time," interrupted Sally Lou, hastily. "Go on, that's a good girl!"

Now, it bored Marian dismally to play for strangers. She refused so habitually that few of her friends knew what a delightful pianist she really was. But dimly she realized that Sally Lou's eyes were flashing with anxious command. She opened the piano.

She ran through the airs from the "Tales from Hoffmann," then played a romping folk-dance, and, at last, the lovely magic of the "Spring Song."

Mrs. Chrisenberry hardly breathed. She sat rigidly in her chair, her knotted little hands shut tight, her beady eyes unwinking.

"My, but that goes to the place," she sighed, as the last airy harmony died away. "Now I'll

bring your cookies and milk, you lambs, and then you'd better be starting home. It looks like rain."

Marian and Sally Lou fell behind in the procession to the carriage. Edward Junior toddled down the board walk, clinging to his hostess's skirt. Thomas Tucker laughed and gurgled in her arms. Mrs. Chrisenberry put Thomas on Mammy's lap, then picked up Edward, who, loath to depart, squeezed her neck with warm, crumby little hands and snuggled his fat cheek to her own. Mrs. Chrisenberry looked down at him. Her grim little nut-cracker face quivered oddly. A dim pink warmed her brown, withered cheek.

"It's nice while they're little, isn't it?" she said, with a queer, wistful smile. "Though I dassent complain. My boys are the best sons anybody ever had, and they treat me like a queen. Here, son, stop pulling my ears so hard; it hurts. Now, I'll send you a whole bowlful of mutton taller tomorrow; and a jar of goose-grease the very next rendering I make. Didn't you say you're living on the drainage job? Well"—the dim pink grew

bright in her cheek—"well, you tell your man that he kin go right ahead and cut his ditch through my land. I'll not stand in the way no longer. Though tell him that I'll expect him to see that his men don't tramp through my garden nor steal my watermelons. Mind that."

"I know I can promise that, always." Sally Lou's eyes were brown stars. "And thank you more than tongue can tell, Mrs. Chrisenberry. You don't know what this will mean to my husband, and I never can tell you how much we shall appreciate your kindness. Packed in all right, Mammy? Come, Edward, son. Good-by!"

They drove away in the silence of utter, astonished joy.

"Your goose-grease worked that miracle, Sally Lou!"

"Nonsense! It was your music that carried the day. But oh, I was so afraid you were going to say no!"

Again Marian's cheeks flushed hot, with queer, vexed shame.

"Well, I did all but refuse. I do hate to play for anybody, especially for strangers."

"Why?" Sally Lou looked hopelessly puzzled. "But when it gives them so much pleasure! And besides, if you want a selfish reason, think how you have helped the boys. There they come now."

With a joyful call Sally Lou waved her scarf to the two figures plodding up the canal road. Then as the flimsy silk could not do justice to her feelings, she caught up little Thomas Tucker and flourished him, a somewhat ponderous banner. The boys hurried to meet them. They listened to the girls' excited tale, at first unbelieving, then with faces of amazement and relief.

"Well, you two girls deserve a diamond medal," declared Burford, heartily. His flushed, perturbed face brightened. "You don't know what a load you have taken off our shoulders." He looked at Roderick. "This is a real sterling-silver lining to our cloud, isn't it, Hallowell? So big that it fairly bulges out around the edges."

"A silver lining to what cloud, Ned?" demanded Sally Lou, promptly curious. "Has something gone wrong with the work? Another break in the machinery? Or trouble among the laborers, or what?"

The two boys looked at each other. Marian studied their faces. Burford was flushed and excited. Rod's stolid dark face was frowning and intent.

"Own up!" commanded Sally Lou, sternly. "Don't you dare try to keep your dark and dreadful secrets from us!"

The boys laughed. But a quick warning glance flashed from one to the other. Then Burford spoke.

"Don't conjure up so many bogies, Sally Lou. We—we've had bad news from Mr. Carlisle. His doctor told me, over the long-distance, that he would not be able to leave the hospital for a fortnight. And he must not come back on the work for two months at the best."

Sally Lou sobered.

"That is bad news. Poor Mr. Carlisle! But is that all that you have to tell me, Ned?"

Burford jumped. He reddened a little.

"Y-yes, I reckon that's all. You girls will have to excuse us now. Hallowell and I are going back to our boat-house to fix up our March reports."

"Anything we two can help about?"

"You two have put in a mighty good day's work in securing that right of way. Though if you're hunting for a job you might verify the yardage report I left on your desk. Run along now, we're going to be busy."

"Such is gratitude," remarked Sally Lou, with ironic philosophy, as she drove away. "'Run along, we're busy.' Just like a boy!"

Roderick and Ned looked after the buckboard, a little shame-faced at Sally Lou's parting shot.

"Just the same, it does no good to tell them all our ill-luck," said Burford.

"And Marvin's threatening to quit is even worse luck than Carlisle's illness. For his quarrel with the foreman has started half a dozen quarrels among the workmen. Queer, isn't it? A grouch like that will spread like wild-fire through a whole camp."

"Marvin is waiting on the house-boat for us this minute." Ned peered through a telescope of his hands. "Now we'll listen to a tale of woe!"

Marvin did not wait till they could reach the boat. His angry voice rang out across the canal.

"Well, *Mister* Hallowell! I just got the note

that you so kindly sent me. So you and Mr. Burford here think that I ought to stand by the job, hey, 'and not let my private quarrels influence me into deserting the contract?' Thank you, *Mister* Hallowell, for your kind advice. But I rather guess I can get along without any orders from either of you two swells. No, nor criticisms, either."

"We're not giving orders, and you know that, Marvin." Rod spoke sharply. "But you're never going to throw down your billet just because of a two-cent fuss with the foreman. Think what a hole you'd leave the company in! Carlisle sick, high water holding back our freight, coal shipments stalled, everything tied up——"

"And you're directly responsible to the company for that berm construction," broke in Burford hotly. "You know well enough that we can't watch that work and oversee the ditch-cutting at one and the same time. You're not going to sneak out and play quitter——"

"I'm going to play quitter, as you call it, whenever I choose. That happens to be right now. You two silk-stockings can like it, or lump it.

Mulcahy!" he yelled to the camp commissary man, who was just starting down the canal in his launch on his way to Grafton for supplies. "Wait, I'm going with you. Here, take this."

He bolted into his cabin, then dashed back, carrying a heavy suit-case. He heaved it into the launch, then sprang in beside the open-mouthed steward.

"Now, I'm off!" He blazed the words at the two boys staring from the bank. "You can run this contract to suit yourselves, gentlemen. I'll send my resignation direct to the company. I don't have to take orders from you two swells another hour. Good-morning, gentlemen!"

The steward grinned sheepishly at sight of his superior officer behaving himself like a spunky small boy. With a rueful nod toward Roderick he headed the launch down the canal.

Burford expressed himself with some vim.

"Well, he's gone. Good riddance, I call it. The surly hound!"

"I don't know about that," muttered Rod. "It was my fault, maybe, writing him that letter. I was too high and mighty, I suppose."

"You needn't blame yourself," returned Burford bluntly. "We've put up with his insolence and his scamped work and his everlasting wrangling long enough. Mr. Carlisle won't blame us; neither will the company."

"We ought to wire company head-quarters at Chicago, and report just how things stand; then they'll send us a supervising engineer to take Mr. Carlisle's place. And a new scrub, too, instead of Marvin."

"You're right, Hollowell. You wire them straight off, will you? I'm going up to the first lateral to watch the afternoon shift."

Early that evening Roderick received the answering wire from head-quarters. He read it carefully. His sober young face settled into grim lines.

An hour later Burford turned up, tired, but in high spirits, for his dredge had made a flying start on the lateral. Roderick handed him the despatch.

The two boys stared at each other. A deep flush burned to Burford's temples. Rod's hard jaw set.

The message was curt and to the point.

"THE BRECKENRIDGE ENGINEERING COMPANY.
OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT.

RODERICK HALLOWELL, ESQ.

% Contract Camp, Grafton, Illinois.

Sir: Your report received. Consider yourself and Burford as jointly in command till further orders. I shall reach camp on route inspection by 26th inst. Kindly report conditions daily by wire.

BRECKENRIDGE."

"So we're made jointly responsible. Put in charge by Breckenridge. By Breck the Great, his very self. H'm-m." Burford looked out at the crowded boats, the muddy, half-built levee, stretching far as eye could see; the night shift of laborers, eighty strong, shuffling aboard the quarter-boat for their hot supper; the massed, powerful machinery, stretching its black funnels and cranes against the red evening sky. "So we're the two Grand Panjandruns on this job. Responsible for excavation that means prosperity or ruin for half the farmers in the district, according as we do or don't finish those laterals before the June rise; responsible for a pay-roll that runs over four hundred dollars a day; re-

sponsible for a time-lock contract that will cost our company five hundred dollars forfeit money a day for every day that we run over our time limit. Well, Hallowell?"

"It strikes me," said Rod, very briefly, "that it's up to us."

"Yes, it is up to us. But if we don't make good——"

"Don't let that worry you." Rod's jaw set, steel. "Don't give that a thought. We'll make good."

CHAPTER VI

THE CONTRACT'S RECEIVING DAY

"HELLO, Sis!" It was Roderick's voice over the telephone. "How are you feeling this fine, muggy morning?"

"Pretty well, I suppose. How are you, Rod? Where are you telephoning from?"

"From Burford's shack. We're in a pinch down here, Marian. We need you to help out. Can't you ask Mr. Gates to hitch up and bring you down to camp right away? Or if you'll walk down to Gates's Landing I'll send Mulcahy with the launch, to bring you the rest of the way. And put on your very best toggery, Sis. War paint and feathers and all that. That pretty lavender silk rig will do. But don't forget the gimcracks. Put on all the jewelry you own."

"Why, Roderick Hallowell! What can you mean? Dress up in my best, and come down to

camp at nine in the morning, and on Sunday morning at that?"

"I mean just what I say." Then Roderick chuckled irresistibly. "Poor Sis, I don't wonder you're puzzled. But Sunday is the contract's day at home, and we want you to stand in line and receive; or pour tea, whichever you prefer to do. Do you see?"

"No, I don't see. All I do see is that you're talking nonsense. And I don't intend to come down to the camp. It is such a hot, horrid morning, I don't propose to stir. I want you to come up and spend the day here instead. Mrs. Gates wants you, too, she says, for dinner and for supper as well. And yesterday the rural-delivery man brought a whole armful of new magazines. We'll sit on the porch, and you can read and I'll write letters, and we'll have a lovely, quiet day together."

There was a pause. When Roderick spoke again, his voice was rather quenched.

"Sorry, Sis, but it isn't possible for me to come, even for dinner. I'll be hard at it here, every minute of the day."

"You mean that you must work on the contract all day Sunday? When you have worked fourteen hours a day, ever since you came West?" Marian's voice was very tart. "Can't you stop long enough to go to church with me, even? There's a beautiful little church four miles away. It's just a pleasant drive. Surely you can give up two hours of the morning, if you can spare no more time!"

"It isn't a question of what I'm willing to do. And I am not planning to work on Sunday. As you know, Sis, we bank our fires Saturday night and give the laborers a day off. Nearly all the men left for town last night to stay till Monday. But listen. Burford tells me that, on every clear Sunday, we can expect a visit from most of the land-owners for miles around. And not just from the land-owners themselves: their sisters, and their cousins, and their aunts; and the children, and the neighbors, and the family cat. They want to see for themselves just how the work is going on. When you stop to think, it's their own work. Their money is paying for every shovelful of dirt we move, and every inch of levee-work. And

they're paying every copper of our salaries, too. They have a right to see how their own investment is being used, Sis."

"So you have to treat these country people as honored guests! Cart them up and down the canal, and show them the excavations, and let them pry into your reports, and ask you silly questions! Of all the tiresome, preposterous things!"

"That's pretty much what we'll do. But there is nothing preposterous about it; it's their right. And we fellows want to do the decent thing. Now, more than ever, we want to do everything properly because Carlisle is sick and away. Burford says that Carlisle was more exacting about these visits of inspection than about anything else on the plant. He said that when a man builds a house to protect his family he has the right to oversee every inch of the construction, if he likes. On the same principle, these farmers who are digging canals and putting up levees to protect their lands should have the right to watch the work, step by step. Burford says, too, that Carlisle, with his everlasting patience and courtesy, was steadily winning

over the whole district; even the men who had fought the first assessments tooth and nail. It is the least we boys can do to keep up the good feeling that Carlisle has established."

"Well, I think it is all very absurd. Why should I come down to the work? These people do not even know that I exist. And if you really need somebody to talk to their wives and be gracious and all that, why can't Mrs. Burford do it better than I? She is right on the ground, anyway."

"Yes, she's right on the ground. And so is Thomas Tucker's newest tooth. The poor little skeezicks howled half the night, Burford says. He has stopped yelling just now, but he won't let his mother out of his sight for one minute. Mrs. Burford is pretty much worn to a frazzle. But I don't want to pester you, Marian." There was a worried note in Rod's voice now. "I wouldn't have you come for any consideration, if it were to make you ill or tired. So perhaps we'd better not think of it."

Marian shrugged her shoulders. An odd, teasing question stirred in her mind.

"I rather think I can stand the day if you can. Finnegan and I will be at the landing in half an hour. I, and my best beads and wampum, and my new spring hat. There, now!"

Not waiting for Rod's delighted reply, she hurried away to dress. A whimsical impulse led her to put on her freshest and daintiest gown, a charming lilac silk, with a wide, tilting picture hat, heaped with white and purple lilacs. She was standing at the little pier, tugging at her long gloves, when the duty-launch, with Rod himself at the wheel, shot round the bend. Rod waved his hand; then, at sight of her amazing finery, he burst into a whoop of satisfaction.

"Will you look at that! Marian Hallowell, you're the best ever. I might have known you'd play up. Though I was scared stiff, for fear you'd think that just every-day clothes would do. My, but you're stunning! You're looking stronger, too, Sis. You're not nearly so wan and spooky as you were a week ago."

"I'm feeling better, too." Marian's color rose. Even her sulky humor must melt under Rod's beaming approval. "Now give me my sailing

orders, Rod. How many callers will we have? What sort of people will they be? Tart and grim, like Mrs. Chrisenberry, I suppose, or else kindly and bashful and 'woody,' like the Gateses? Will they stop by on their way home from church, or will they come promptly after dinner and spend the afternoon?"

Rod laughed. "No telling, Sister. We may have ten callers, we may have a hundred. You'll find all kinds of people among them; precisely as you'll find all kinds of people on Mount Vernon Street, Boston, Massachusetts. There'll be nice, neighborly folks who'll drive up the canal road in Bond Street motoring clothes and sixty-horse-power cars. There'll be other nice, neighborly folks who'll ride in through the woods on their plough horses, wearing slat sunbonnets and hickory shirts. And they'll be friendly, and critical, and enthusiastic, and dubersome, all in a heap. You'll need all your social experience, and all your tact, and all the diplomacy you can muster. See?"

"Yes, I'm beginning to see." Marian's eyes were thoughtful. Then she sprang up to wave

her lilac parasol in greeting to the martin-box and Sally Lou.

"Isn't this the most mournful luck that ever was!" Sally Lou sat with Thomas Tucker, a forlorn little figure, planted firmly on her knee. "To think that my son must spend his first afternoon of the season in cutting a wicked double tooth! Maybe it'll come through by dinner-time, though. Then he'll go to sleep, and I can slip over and help you entertain our people— Why, Marian Hallowell! Oh, what a lovely, lovely gown! You wise child, how did you know that to wear it to-day was precisely the wisest thing that you could possibly do!"

"I didn't know that. I just put it on. Partly for fun, and—well, partly to provoke Rod, I suppose." Marian felt rather foolish. But she had no time for further confidences.

Up the muddy canal road came a roomy family carriage, drawn by a superbly matched black team. That carriage was packed solid to the dashboard. Father, two tall boys, and a rosy little daughter crammed the front seat; mother, grandmother, and aunty were fitted neatly into

the back; and a fringe of small fry swung from every direction.

"Morning." The father reined in and gave everybody a friendly nod and smile. "How are you, Mr. Burford? Glad to meet you, Mr. Hallowell. No, thank you, we're on our way to Sunday-school and church, so we haven't a minute to stop. But I have been wanting to know how you think lateral four will work out; the one that turns down past my farm. Will that sand cut give you much trouble?"

"It will make slower dredging, Mr. Moore. But we'll put it through as fast as we can."

"Um. I'm in no hurry to see it go through. The high water isn't due for a month, anyway. Now, I don't know much about sand-cutting. But I've been told that your worst trouble in a sand streak is with the slides. After your dredge-dipper has dumped the stuff ashore, it won't stay put. It keeps tobogganing back into the channel and blocking your cut. So sometimes you have to hoist it out two or three times over."

"That's exactly the case, Mr. Moore. Usually our levee gangs follow along and tamp the sand

down, or else spread it back from the berm where it has no chance to slide. But it is getting so near the time set for the completion of our upper lateral cut that we are obliged to keep our levee shift at work on the upper laterals and take our chances on the sand staying where we pile it."

"Just what I'd supposed. Now, I shall need a lot of that sand, in a week or so, for some cement work. S'pose I send you a couple of teams and half a dozen hands to-morrow, to cart off the sand under your direction. Would that help things along?"

"Help things along? I should say it would!" Rod beamed. "It would be the most timely help we could ask."

"But won't it put you to a lot of trouble, sir," asked Burford, "to take the hands off their regular farm-work in that way?"

"W-well, no. Anyway they can haul sand for a day or so without making much difference. And it will be a heap handier for you boys to have the stuff carted off as fast as you throw it ashore."

"It surely will. That's the best news we've heard in one while!" The boys stood smiling

at each other, completely radiant. Mr. Moore nodded and turned his horses.

"Glad if it will be any accommodation. Well, good day to you all. My good wishes to Mr. Carlisle. Tell him I said he left a couple of mighty competent substitutes, but that his neighbors will be glad to see him coming back, just the same."

The big carriage with its gay load rolled away.

"So Moore will send men and teams to help us on that sand cut!" Burford, fairly chortling with satisfaction, started toward the martin-box. "If all our land-owners treated us with half the consideration that he always gives, our work would be a summer's dream. I'm going up to tell Sally Lou."

He had hardly reached the martin-box before he turned with a shout.

"There come our next visitors, Hallowell. The commodore and Mrs. McCloskey, in that fat little white launch. See?"

Commodore McCloskey it was, indeed. Finnegan's wild yelp of delighted greeting would have told as much. Marian promptly joined the hilarious race to the pier. The commodore, crisp and

blinding-white in his starchy duck, stood at his launch wheel, majestic as if he stood on the bridge of an ocean liner. But Mrs. McCloskey, a dainty, soft-eyed, little old lady, with cheeks like Scotch roses, and silky curls white as dandelion down blowing from under her decorous gray bonnet, won Marian's heart at the first glance. She was as quaint and gentle and charming as an old-time miniature.

While the boys took the commodore up and down the laterals that he might see their progress since his last visit, Mrs. McCloskey trailed her soft old black silk skirts to the martin-box door and begged for a glimpse of the baby.

"He's crosser than a prickly little porcupine," protested Sally Lou, handing him over reluctantly.

"Oh, but he'll come to me just the minute! Won't you, lamb?"

And like a lamb Thomas Tucker forgot his sorrows and snuggled happily into her tender arms, while his relieved mother bustled about and helped Marian to make a generous supply of lemonade; for half a dozen carriage loads of visitors were now coming up the road.

“’Tis amazin’. Where do they all come from?” observed Mrs. McCloskey. “Yet there’s nigh three hundred land-owners in this district. And the commodore, he passed the word yesterday that there’s close on two hundred thousand acres of land that will be protected by this one drainage contract. Think of that, Miss Marian. Is it not grand to know that your brother is giving the power of his hands and his brains to such a big, helping work as all that?”

“Why, I suppose so.” Marian spoke absently.

“And ye will be a help to him, too, I can see that.” Mrs. McCloskey put out a hesitating little hand in a quaint old silken mitt and patted Marian’s fluffy gown. “’Tis not everybody makes as bould as meself to tell you in so many words of your pretty finery. But sure ’tis everybody that will appreciate it, an’ be pleased an’ honored with the compliment of it.”

Marian looked utterly puzzled.

“You think that I can be a help to Rod? Why, I don’t know the least thing about his work. I really don’t understand——”

“Well, aren’t you a magic-maker, Auntie Mc-

Closkey!" Sally Lou put down the lemon-squeezer and stared. "Look at that precious baby! Sound asleep in your lap! While I haven't been able to pacify him for one minute, though I walked and sang all night!"

"'Tis the cruel tooth has come through, I'm thinkin'." Mrs. McCloskey laid the peaceful little porcupine tenderly into his crib. "Now, I'll stay and watch him while you two go and meet your guests. I'll call you the minute he chirps."

The two girls hurried to greet their callers, to offer them chairs on the shady side of the quarter-boat, to serve them with iced tea and lemonade. Much to Marian's surprise, she found herself chattering away vigorously and actually enjoying it all. As Rod had said, the slow stream that came and went all day included all sorts and conditions of folk. There were the gracious old clergyman and his sweet, motherly wife, who stopped for a pleasant half-hour, then jogged on across the country to his "afternoon meeting," twelve miles out in the lowlands. There were the two brisk young plutocrats from the great Kensington stock farm

up-river, who flashed up in a stunning satiny-gray French car, for a brief exchange of courtesies. There were two of the district commissioners, quiet, keen-eyed gentlemen. One of these men, Rod told his sister later, was doing valuable service to the community by his experiments in improving the yield of corn throughout the district. The other commissioner was a lawyer of national reputation. Mrs. Chrisenberry stopped by, too: a brusque little visitor, sitting very stiff and fine in her cushioned phaeton, her beady eyes darting questions through her shrewd spectacles. Marian, feeling very real gratitude, devoted herself to Mrs. Chrisenberry. That lady, however, hardly spoke till just as she was starting to go. Then she leaned forward in her carriage. She fixed Marian with a gimlet eye.

"It's agreeable to see that you think we district folks *is* folks," she said, very tartly indeed. "I'd some mistrusted the other day, but I guess now that you know what's what. Good-afternoon, all."

"Well, Sally Lou! Will you tell me what she meant?"

Sally Lou nodded wisely.

"Your pretty dress, I suspect. Didn't you hear Mrs. McCloskey praise it, too?"

"Oh!" And now Marian's face was very thoughtful indeed.

Late in the afternoon came the one disagreeable episode of the day.

The drainage district, upon which Roderick and Burford were employed, had become part of a huge league known as the Central Mississippi Drainage Association. This league had recently been organized. Its object was the cutting of protective ditches on a gigantic scale, and its annual expenditures for this work would run well past the million mark. Naturally there was strong competition between all the great engineering firms to win a favorable standing in the eyes of this new and powerful corporation. The Breckenridge Company, because of its superior record, was easily in the lead. None the less, as Rod had remarked a day or so before, it was up to every member of the Breckenridge Company, from Breck the Great down to the meekest cub engineer, to keep that lead.

Burford jeered mildly at Rod for taking his own small importance to the company so seriously.

"Just you wait and see," retorted Roderick.

"Oh, I'll wait, all right," laughed Burford. To-day, however, he was destined to see; and to see almost too clearly for his own peace of mind.

A sumptuous limousine car whirled up the muddy road. Its lordly door swung open; down stepped a large, autocratic gentleman, in raiment of startling splendor, followed by a quiet, courteous elderly man.

"I am Mr. Ellingworth Locke, of New York. I am the acting president of the Central Mississippi Drainage Association," announced the magnificent one. "You gentlemen, I take it, are the—ah—the junior engineers left in charge by Mr. Carlisle?"

Roderick and Burford admitted their identity.

"This is Mr. Crosby, our consulting engineer. Now that this district has joined the association, it comes under our direct surveillance. Mr. Crosby and I desire to go over your laterals and get an idea of your work thus far."

"We are honored." Burford bowed low and welcomed his guests with somewhat flamboyant courtesy. He led the way to the duty-launch. Roderick followed, bringing the cushions and the tarpaulin which the quick-witted Sally Lou hastily commanded him to carry aboard for the potentate's comfort.

Of all their guests, that long day, the acting president was the sole critic. At every rod of the big ditch, at every turn of the laterals, he found some petty fault. The consulting engineer, Mr. Crosby, followed him about in embarrassed silence. He was obviously annoyed by his employer's rudeness. However, for all Mr. Locke's strictures, it was evident that he could find no serious fault with the work. Yet both boys were tingling with vexation and chagrin when the regal limousine rolled away at last.

"What does ail his highness? Did ever you see such a beautiful grouch?" Rod mopped his forehead and stared belligerently after the car.

"Nothing ails him but a badly swelled head." Burford's jaw set hard. "The fact of it is, that the worshipful Mr. Ellingworth Locke hasn't two

pins' worth of practical knowledge of dredging. He is a New York banker, and he has no understanding of conditions west of the Hudson. His bank is to make the loans for the association's drainage, and he has bought a big tract of land in this district. That is why he was elected acting president. Do you see?"

"Yes, that helps to explain things."

"So he struts around and tries to pick flaws with the most trifling points of our construction, to keep us from guessing how little he really knows about the big underlying principles. Gentle innocent, he tries to think he's an expert!" Burford waved a disrespectful muddy paw after the flying car. "All that an acting president is good for, anyway, is to wear white spats and to put on side."

"Well, that engineer knows his job."

"Crosby? Yes, he's an engineer all right. And a gentleman, too. Just the same, I'm glad we kowtowed to Mr. Locke. His opinion is so influential that his approval may mean a tremendous advantage to the Breckenridge Company some day."

"I'm hoping that Breckenridge himself will come before long and give us a looking over."

"I'm hoping for that myself. Half an hour of Breck will swing everything into shape. You want to know Breckenridge if ever you get the chance, Hallowell. He's the grandest ever. Just to watch him tramp up and down a ditch, great big silent figure that he is, and hear him fire off those cool, close-mouthed questions of his at you, brings you bristling up like a fighting-cock. He's a regular inspiration, I call him."

"I'm banking on the chance that I shall know him some day." Rod's eyes lighted. He remembered the words of his old professor, "To work under Breckenridge is not only an advantage to any engineer. It is an education in itself."

It was nearly six o'clock when their last callers arrived. They were not an interesting carriage load: a gaunt, silent, middle-aged man; a sallow-cheeked young woman, in cheap, showy clothes, her rough hands glittering with gaudy rings; and a six-year-old girl—a pitiful little ghost of a girl—who looked like a frail little shadow against Sally Lou's lusty, rosy two-year-old son. Her warped,

tiny body in its forlorn lace-trimmed pink silk dress was braced in pillows in her mother's arms. Her dim black eyes stared listlessly with the indifference of long suffering.

Marian was always shaken and repelled by the sight of pain. But by this time Thomas Tucker was awake and loudly demanding his mother; so Marian must do her shrinking best, to make the new-comers feel themselves welcomed.

"No, Mamie she don't drink lemonade. No, she don't want no milk, neither. We'll just set here in the cool and rest a while till pappy gets through lookin' around." The young, tired mother sat down on the little pier. She settled the wan little creature carefully into her arms again. "No, there's nothing you can get for her; nothing at all."

"Doesn't she like to look at pictures? I have some new magazines," ventured Marian.

"She does like pictures once in a while. Want to see what the lady's got for you, Mamie?"

Mamie roused herself and looked silently at the books that Marian piled before her. Bent on pleasing the little wraith, Marian cut out several

lovely ladies, and on a sudden inspiration added rosy cheeks from Rod's tray of colored pencils.

Those red and blue and purple pencils caught Mamie's listless eye. She even bestirred herself to try and draw a portrait or so with her own shaky little fingers.

"Beats all," sighed her mother. A little pleased color rose in her cheeks. "I haven't seen her take such an interest for months. Not even in her dollies. We buy her all the playthings we can think of. Her pappy, he don't ever go to town without he up and brings her a whole grist of candy and toys and clutter. But we never once thought of the pencils for her. Nor of paper dolls, either. My, I'm glad we stopped by. And her pappy, he'll be more pleased than words can tell. He's always so heart-set for Mamie to have a little fun."

"She must take these pencils home with her. Rod has a whole boxful." Marian tied up not only the pencils, but a generous roll of Rod's heavy drawing-paper, expressly adapted to making paper dolls that would stand alone. The child clutched the bundle in her little lean hands without a word

of thanks. But her white little face was eloquent. So was her father's face when he came to carry her away, and heard her mother's story of the new pleasure.

"Well, this day has meant hard work all right, even though it was a day of rest from my regular work," said Roderick. He was swinging the launch up the canal to the Gates's Landing. "It's a queer way to spend Sunday, isn't it, Sis? But it seems to be the only way for me just at present. And you can be sure that we're obliged to you, old lady, for the way that you've held up your end."

"I didn't mind the day, nor did I mind meeting all those people nearly as much as I'd imagined that I would," pondered Marian. "Especially the McCloskeys, the dear things! And that poor little crippled child, too. I wish I could do something more for her. Y-yes, as you say, it was pretty hard work. I'm rather tired to-night. But the day was well worth while."

But just how worth while that day had been, neither Rod nor Marian could know.

CHAPTER VII

THE COAL AND THE COMMODORE

"READY for breakfast, Miss Hallowell?" Mrs. Gates's pleasant voice summoned her.

"Just a minute." Marian loitered at the window, looking out at the transformed woods and fields. She could hardly believe her eyes. Two weeks ago only stark, leafless branches and muddy gray earth had stretched before her. But in these fourteen days, the magic of early April had wrought wonders. The trees stood clothed in shining new leaves, thick and luxuriant as a New England June. The fields were sheets of living green.

"It doesn't seem real," she sighed happily. "It isn't the same country that it was when I first came."

"No more are you the same girl." Mrs. Gates nodded approvingly behind the tall steaming

coffee-pot. "My, you were that peaky and piney! But nowadays you're getting some real red in your cheeks, and you eat more like a human being and less like a canary-bird."

Marian twinkled.

"Your brother is gettin' to be the peaky one, nowadays," went on Mrs. Gates, with her placid frankness. "Seems to me I never saw a boy look as beat out as he does, ever since that big cave-in on the canal last week. I'm thankful for this good weather for him. Maybe he can make up for the time they lost digging out the cave-in if it stays clear and the creeks don't rise any higher. He's a real worker, isn't he? Seems like he'd slave the flesh off his bones before he'd let his job fall behind. But I don't like to see him look so gaunt and tired. It isn't natural in a boy like him."

Marian looked puzzled.

"Why, Rod is always strong and well."

"He's strong, yes. But even strong folks can tire out. Flesh and blood aren't steel and wire. You'd better watch him pretty sharp, now that hot weather is coming. He needs it."

Marian pushed back her plate with a frown. Her dainty breakfast had suddenly lost its savor.

"Watch over Rod! I should think it was Rod's place to watch over me, instead. And when I have been so ill, too!" she said to herself.

Yet a queer little thorn of anxiety pricked her. She called Mr. Finnegan and raced with him down through the wet green woods to the canal. Roderick stood on the dredge platform, talking to the head dredge-runner. He hailed Marian with a shout.

"You're just in time to see me off, Sis. I'm going to Saint Louis to hurry up our coal shipment."

"The coal shipment? I thought a barge-load of coal was due here yesterday."

"Due, yes. But it hasn't turned up, and we're on our last car-load this minute. That's serious. We'll have to shut down if I can't hurry a supply to camp within thirty-six hours."

Marian followed him aboard the engineers' house-boat and watched him pack his suit-case.

"Why are you taking all those time-books, Rod? Surely you will not have time to make up your

week's reports during that three-hour trip on the train?"

"These aren't my weekly reports. These are tabulated operating expenses. President Sturdevant, the head of our company, has just announced that he wants us to furnish data for every working day. He's a bit of a martinet, you know. He wants everything figured up into shape for immediate reference. He says he proposes to follow the cost of this job, excavation, fill, everything, within thirty-six hours of the time when the actual work is done. He doesn't realize that that means hours of expert book-keeping, and that we haven't a book-keeper in the camp. So Burford and I have had to tackle it, in addition to our regular work. And it's no trifle." Roderick rolled up a formidable mass of notes. There was a worried tone in his steady voice.

"Why doesn't the company send you a book-keeper?"

"Burford and I are planning to ask for one when the president and Breckenridge come to camp on their tour of inspection."

"Could I do some of the work for you, Rod?"

"Thank you, Sis, but I'm afraid you'd find it a Chinese puzzle. I get tangled up in it myself half the time. We must set down every solitary item of cost, no matter how trifling; not only wages and supplies, but breakdowns, time losses, even those of a few minutes; then calculate our average, day by day; then plot a curve for each week's work, showing the cost of the contract for that week, and set it against our yardage record for that week. Then verify it, item by item, and send it in."

"All tied up in beautiful red-tape bow-knots, I suppose," added Marian, with a sniff. She poked gingerly into the mass of papers. "The idea of adding book-keeping to your twelve-hour shift as superintendent! And in this stuffy, noisy little box!" She looked impatiently around the close narrow state-room. The ceiling was not two feet above her head; the hot morning sunlight beat on the flat tin roof of the house-boat and dazzled through the windows. "How can you work here?—or sleep, either?"

Rob rubbed his hand uncertainly across his eyes.

"I don't sleep much, for a fact. Too hot.

Sometimes I drop off early, but the men always wake me at midnight when the last shift goes off duty."

"But the laborers are all across on their own quarter-boat. They don't come aboard your house-boat?"

"No, but the quarter-boat is only fifty feet away. The cook has their hot supper ready at twelve, and they lark over it, and laugh and shout and cut up high-jinks, like a pack of school-boys. I wouldn't mind, only I can't get to sleep again. I lie there and mull over the contract, you see. I can't help it."

"Why don't you come up to the Gates farmhouse and sleep there?"

"I couldn't think of that. It's too far away. I must stay right here and keep my eye on the work, every minute. You have no idea what a dangerously narrow margin of time we have left; 'specially for those north laterals, you know, Sis." His voice grew sharp and anxious. Marian looked at him keenly. For the first time she saw the dull circles under his eyes, the drawn, tired lines around his steady mouth.

Then she glanced up the ditch. High on its green stilts, Sally Lou's perky little martin-box caught her eye.

"I have it, Rod! Tell some of your laborers to build a cabin for you, like the Burfords'! Then I'll come down and keep house for you."

Roderick shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't spare a solitary laborer from the contract, Marian; not for a day. We're short-handed as it is. No, I'll stay where I am. I'm doing well enough. Steam up, Mulcahy? Good-by, Sis. Back to-morrow!"

Marian watched the launch till it disappeared in the green mist of the willows. Then she sat down to her brother's desk and began to sort the clutter of papers. But sorting them was not an easy matter. To her eyes they were only a bewildering tangle. Marian knew that she possessed an inborn knack at figures, and it piqued her to find that she could not master Roderick's accounts at the first glance. She worked on and on doggedly. The little state-room grew hot and close; the dull throb of the dredge machinery and the noisy voices from without disturbed her more and more.

At last she sprang up and swept the whole mass into her hand-bag. Then she ran up the hill to the martin-box.

Sally Lou, very fresh and cool in pink dimity, sat in her screened nest, with the babies playing on the scrubbed floor. She nodded in amused sympathy at Marian's portentous armful.

"Aren't those records a dismal task! Yes, I've found a way to sift them, though it took me a long time to learn. Start by adding up the time-book accounts; verify each laborer's hours, and see whether his pay checks correspond to his actual working time. Roderick has fifty men on his shift, so that is no small task. Then add up his memoranda of time made by the big dredge; and also the daily record of the two little dredges up at the laterals. Then run over the steward's accounts and see whether they check with his bills——"

Marian stared at Sally Lou, astonished.

"Well, but Sally Lou! Think how much time that will mean! Why, I would have to spend all afternoon on the time-books alone."

Sally Lou raised her yellow head and looked at

Marian very steadily. A tiny spark glinted in her brown eyes.

"Well, what if it does take all afternoon? Have you anything better to do?"

There was a minute of silence. Then Marian's cheeks turned rather pink.

"I suppose not. But it is horridly tedious work, Sally Lou. On such a warm day, too."

"It certainly is." Sally Lou's voice was quite dry. She caught up Thomas Tucker, who was trying laboriously to feed Mr. Finnegan with a large ball of darning cotton. "You'd find it even more tedious if you were obliged to work at it evenings, as your brother does. Can't you stay to lunch, Marian? We'll love to have you; won't we, babies?"

"Thank you, no. Mrs. Gates will expect me at home."

Marian walked back through the woods, her head held high. The glint in Sally Lou's eyes had been a bit of a challenge. Again she felt her cheeks flush hot, with a queer puzzled vexation.

"I'll show her that I can straighten Rod's papers, no matter how muddled they are!" she

said to herself, tartly. And all that warm spring afternoon she toiled with might and main.

Roderick, meanwhile, was spending a hard, discouraging day. Arriving at Saint Louis, he found the secretary of the coal-mining company at his office. Eager and insistent, he poured out his urgent need of the promised barge-load of coal. The consignment was now a week overdue. The dredges had only a few hundred bushels at hand; in less than forty-eight hours the engines must shut down, unless he could get the fuel to camp.

"You can't be any more disturbed by this crisis than I am, Mr. Hallowell," the secretary assured him. "Owing to a strike at the mines we have been forced to cancel all deliveries. I can't let you have a single ton."

Roderick gasped.

"But our dredges! We don't dare shut down. Our contract has a chilled-steel time-lock, sir, with a heavy forfeit. We must not run over our date limits. We've got to have that coal!"

"You may be able to pick up a few tons from small dealers," said the secretary, turning back to

his desk. "You'll be buying black diamonds in good earnest, for the retail price has gone up thirty per cent since the news came of the mines strike. Wish you good luck, Mr. Hallowell. Sorry that is all that I can do for you."

Roderick lost no time. He bought a business directory and hailed a taxicab. For six hours he drove from one coal-dealer's office to another. At eight o'clock that night he reached his hotel, tired in every bone, but in royal high spirits. Driblet by driblet, and paying a price that fairly staggered him, he had managed to buy over four hundred tons.

"That will keep us going till the strike is settled," he told Burford over the long-distance.

"Bully for you!" returned Burford, jubilant. "But how will you bring it up to camp?"

"Oh, the railroad people have promised empties on to-morrow morning's early freight to Grafton. Then we can carry it to camp on our own barges. I shall come up on that freight myself. I shall not risk losing sight of that coal. Mind that."

At five the next morning Roderick went down to the freight yards. His coal wagons were al-

ready arriving. But not one of the promised "empties" could he find.

"There is a mistake somewhere," said the yard-master. "Can't promise you a solitary car for three days, anyway. Traffic is all behindhand. You'd better make a try at head-quarters."

"I have no time to waste at head-quarters," retorted Rod. He was white with anger and chagrin. This ill luck was a bolt from a clear sky. "I'll go down to the river front and hire a barge and a tow-boat. I'll get that coal up to camp tomorrow if I have to carry it in my suit-case."

His hunt for a barge proved a stern chase, but finally he secured a large flat-boat at a reasonable rental. But after searching the river front for miles, he found only one tow-boat that could be chartered. The tow's captain, noting Roderick's anxiety, and learning that he represented the great Breckenridge Company, promptly declared that he would not think of doing the two-days' towing for less than five hundred dollars.

"Five hundred dollars for two days' towing! And I have already paid three times the mine price for my coal!" Roderick groaned inwardly.

Suddenly his eye caught two trim red stacks and a broad familiar bow not fifty yards away. It was the little packet, the *Lucy Lee*. She was just lowering her gang-plank, making ready to take on freight for her trip up-stream.

"I'll hail the *Lucy*. Maybe the captain can tell me where to find another tow-boat. Ahoy, the *Lucy*! Is your captain aboard? Ask him to come on deck and talk to Hallowell, of the Breckenridge Company, will you?"

"The captain has not come down yet, sir. But our pilot, Commodore McCloskey, is here. Will you talk with him?"

"Will I talk to the commodore? I should hope so!" Rod's strained face broke into a joyful grin. He could have shouted with satisfaction when Commodore McCloskey, trim as a gimlet in starchy white duck, strolled down the gang-plank and gave him a friendly hand.

"Sure, I don't wonder ye're red-hot mad," he said, with twinkling sympathy. "Five hundred dollars for two days' tow! 'Tis no better than a pirate that tow-boat captain is, sure. But come with me. I have a friend at court that can give

ye a hand, maybe. Hi, boy! Is Captain Lathrop, of the *Queen*, round about?"

"The *Queen*? Why, her captain is the very man who demanded the five hundred dollars!" blurted Rod.

At that moment the captain's head popped from the cabin door. He stared at Roderick. He stared at Commodore McCloskey. Then he had the grace to duck wildly back, with a face sheepish beyond words to describe.

"Well, Captain Lathrop!" Commodore McCloskey's voice rang merciless and clear. "Tell me the truth. Is it yourself that's turned highway robber? Five hundred dollars for twenty hours' tow! Sure, ye must be one of thim high fin-an-ciers we read about in the papers. Why not make it five hundred dollars per ton? Then ye could sell the *Queen* and buy yourself a Cu-narder for a tow-boat instead."

Captain Lathrop squirmed.

"How should I know he was a friend of yours, commodore? I'll take his coal all the way to camp, and gladly, for three hundred, seein' as it's a favor to you."

"For three hundred, is it?" The commodore began a further flow of eloquence. But Rod caught his arm.

"Three hundred will be all right. And I'm more obliged to you, commodore, than I can say. Now I'm off. If ever I can do you a good turn, mind you give me the chance!"

It was late the next night when Roderick reached the camp landing with his precious black diamonds. He was desperately tired, muddy, and begrimed with smoke and coal-dust, hungry as a wolf, and hilarious with relief at his hard-earned success. Marian, Sally Lou, and Burford were all waiting for him at the little pier. Sally Lou dragged him up to the martin-box for a late supper. Afterward Marian, who was to spend the night with Sally Lou, walked back with him to his house-boat.

"Yes, yes, I'm all right, Sis. Don't fidget over me so." Roderick stepped into his state-room and dropped down into his desk chair. "Whew! I'm thankful to get back. I could go to sleep standing up, if it wasn't for making up the records for President Sturdevant. Run away now, that's



"WELL, CAPTAIN LATHROP!" COMMODORE MCCLOSKEY'S VOICE
RANG MERCILESS AND CLEAR.

a good girl, and let me straighten my accounts. Then I can go to bed."

Even as he spoke Rod's glance swept his desk. Instead of the heaped disorder of the day before, he saw now rows of neatly docketed papers. He gave a whistle of surprise.

"Who has been overhauling my desk? Burford? Why—why, did *you* do this for me, sister? Well, on my word, you are just the very best ever." His big fingers gripped Marian's arm and gave her a grateful little shake. "You've squared up every single account, haven't you! And your figuring is always accurate. This means two hours' extra sleep for me. Maybe you think I won't enjoy 'em!"

"I might have been keeping your accounts for you all these weeks," returned Marian. She was a little mortified by Roderick's astonished gratitude. "It is not hard work for me. I really enjoyed doing it."

"Maybe you think I don't enjoy having you do it!" Rod chuckled contentedly. "I've dreaded those accounts all day. Now I shall sleep the sleep of the loafer who has let his sister do his work for him. Good-night, old lady!"

Marian tucked herself comfortably into her corner of the martin-box, but not to sleep. Try her best, she could not banish Rod's tired face from her mind. Neither could she forget the look of his little state-room. True, she had made it daintily fresh and neat. But the tiny box was hot and stuffy at best. What could she do to make Rod's quarters more comfortable?

At last she sat up with a whispered exclamation.

"Good! I'll try that plan. Perhaps it won't do after all. But it cannot hurt to try. And if my scheme can make Rod the least bit more comfortable, then the trying will be well worth while!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE BURGOO

VERY early the next morning, Marian set to work upon her brilliant plan for Roderick's comfort. The coast was clear for action. Both Roderick and Ned Burford had gone up the canal to oversee the excavation at the north laterals. Sally Lou had packed Mammy and the babies into the buckboard and had driven away to the nearest farm-house for eggs and butter. So Marian had a clear field. And she made eager use of every moment.

Perhaps two hundred yards from the canal bank, set well up on a little knoll where it could catch every passing breeze, stood a broad wooden platform. High posts, built to hold lanterns, were set at the four corners and half-way down each side.

"The young folks of the district built that platform for their picnic dances," Burford had told

Marian. "But this year our dredges have torn up this whole section and have made the creek banks so miry and disagreeable that no picnic parties will come this way till the contract is finished and the turf has had time to grow again."

Marian measured the platform with a calculating eye.

"It is built of matched boards, as tight and sound as if they had put it up yesterday. It will make a splendid floor for Rod's house. But when it comes to building the house itself—that's the question."

The contract supplies, she knew, were kept in a store-room built astern of Roderick's house-boat. For a hot, tiresome hour she poked and pried through high-piled hogsheads and tiers of boxes, hoping that she might find a tent. But there was no such good fortune for her. She dragged out bale after bale of heavy new canvas. But every one of the scores of tents provided by the company was already pitched, to form the summer village occupied by the levee laborers. At last, quite vexed and impatient, she gave up her search.

"Although, if I had any knack at all, I could sew

up a tent from these yards on yards of canvas," she reflected.

She carried one bolt of cloth on deck and unrolled it.

"This is splendid heavy canvas. It is just the solid, water-proof sort that the fishermen at the lake last summer used for walls and roof of their 'open-faced camp,' as they called it. Now, I wonder. Why can't I lash long strips of canvas to the four posts of the platform for walls; then fasten heavy wires from one post to another and lash a slanting canvas roof to that! I can canopy it with mosquito-bar—a double layer—for there are dozens of yards of netting here. It would be a ridiculously funny little coop, I know that. But it would be far cooler and quieter than the boat. I believe Rod would like it. Anyway, we'll see!"

Jacobs, the commissary man, came aboard a few minutes later with a basket of clean linen. He looked at Marian, already punching eyelet-holes in the heavy duck, with friendly concern.

"Best let me give you a lift at that job, miss," he urged, when Marian had told him her plans. "I have an hour off, and I shall be pleased to help,

if you will permit me. I'm an old sailor and I have my needle and palm in my kit. That kind of fancy work is just pastime to me. Indeed, I'd enjoy doing anything, if it's for Mr. Hallowell. We've never had a better boss, that's certain. You lace those strips of duck, then I'll hang them for you. We'll curtain off just a half of the platform. That will leave the other half for a fine open porch. We'll have this house built in two jiffies. Then I'll put Mr. Hallowell's canvas cot and his desk and his chair into place, all ready; so when he comes home to-night he will find himself moved and settled."

It took longer than two jiffies to lash up the canvas shack, to hang mosquito bar, and to move Roderick's simple furniture. Returning from their drive, Sally Lou and Mammy Easter hurried to help; and, thanks to many willing hands, the tiny new abode was finished by afternoon; even to the brackets for Rod's lamp, which Jacobs screwed into a corner post, and the rack for his towels.

At six o'clock, Roderick, fagged out and spattered with mud, came down the canal. He would

have gone directly aboard his house-boat if Marian had not called him ashore.

"March up here and see my out-door sitting-room," she commanded, with laughing eyes.

"Oh, you and Sally Lou have made a play-house of that platform? That's all very nice. But wait till I can scrub up and swallow a mouthful of supper, Sis. My skiff tipped over with me up the canal, and I'm soaking wet, and dead tired besides."

"Oh, no, Rod. Please come up right away. I can't wait, Slow-Coach. You really must see!"

Roderick was well used to Marian's imperious whims. Reluctantly he climbed the slippery bank. Obediently he poked his head past the flap which Marian held back for him.

There he saw his own cot spread white and fresh under its cool screen; his tidy desk; and even a "shower-bath," which clever Jacobs had contrived from a tiny force-pump and a small galvanized tank, borrowed from the company's store-room.

For a long minute he stared about him without one word. Then his tired face brightened to a glow of incredulous delight.

"Marian Hallowell! Did you rig up this whole contrivance, all for me? Well!" He sank down on the cot with a sigh of infinite satisfaction. "You certainly are the best sister I ever had, old lady. First you take my book-keeping off my hands. Next you build me a brand-new house, where I can sleep—whew! Won't I sleep like a log to-night, in all this quiet and coolness! On my word, I don't believe I could stand up to my work, Sis, if you didn't help me out as you do."

Marian grew radiant at his pleasure.

"Building it was no end of fun, Rod. I never enjoyed anything more."

"Only I hope you haven't tired yourself out," said her brother, suddenly anxious. "You haven't the strength to work like this."

"Nonsense! You don't realize how much stronger I am, Rod."

"You surely do look a hundred per cent better than you did a month ago." Roderick looked at her with keen satisfaction. "But you must not overtire yourself."

"Don't be so fussy, brother. It was just a trifle, anyway."

"It won't mean a trifle to me. Quiet and sleep will give me a chance to get my head above water and breathe. Hello, neighbors!" For Sally Lou and Ned were poking their unabashed heads through the fly. "Come in and see my new mansion. Guess I'll have to give a house-warming to celebrate. What do you say?"

"There's a celebration already on the way," laughed Burford. "Commodore McCloskey has just called me up on the long-distance. He says that he and Mrs. McCloskey will stop at the camp bright and early to-morrow morning to escort your sister and Sally Lou to the Barry County burgoo. I accepted the invitation for both you girls, for a 'burgoo,' whatever it means, sounds like a jolly lark; especially since the commodore is to be your host. But I'll admit that I'm puzzled. What do you suppose a burgoo may be?"

The four looked at each other.

"It sounds rather like a barbecue," ventured Sally Lou.

"Hoots! It is far too early in the spring for a barbecue."

"Burgoo? *Barbecue?*" Marian spoke the mys-

tic words over, bewildered. "What is a barbecue, pray? Two such grim, ferocious words I never heard."

"A barbecue is a country-side picnic, where the company unite to buy a huge piece of beef; sometimes a whole ox. Then they roast it in a trench floored with hot stones. The usual time for a barbecue is in August. Then they add roasting ears and new potatoes to the beef, and have a dinner fit for a king."

"Or for an ogre," returned Marian. "It sounds like a feast for giants. Yet a burgoo sounds even fiercer and more barbaric. I shall ask the commodore what it means, the minute he comes. Wasn't he a dear to think of taking us?"

Bright and early, even as he had promised, Mr. McCloskey's trig little launch puffed up to the camp landing. The commodore, arrayed as Solomon in snowy linen, a red tie, and a large Panama, waved greeting. Beside him sat Mrs. McCloskey, her sweet little old face beaming under her crisp frilled sunbonnet.

The two girls stepped aboard, with Finnegan prancing joyfully after. For to-day the Burford

babies were to stay at home with Mammy, while Finnegan was to attend the burgoo, a specially bidden guest.

"And now, Mr. McCloskey! Tell us quick! What may a burgoo be?"

"A burgoo?" Commodore McCloskey reflected. "Well, then, so ye don't know a burgoo by experience? Wherever was ye brought up? A burgoo is a burgoo, sure. 'Tis the only word in the English language that describes it. 'Tis sack-races, an' pole-climbin', an' merry-go-rounds, an' pink limonade, an' a brass band, an' kettles full of b'iled chicken an' gravy, an' more mortal things to eat than the tongue of man can name. Ye must see it to understand the real po'try of it. For the half of it could not be told to you."

The commodore was quite right. The burgoo was all that he had claimed, and more. At least two hundred people, gay in their Sunday best, had already gathered at the county picnic grounds, a beautiful open woodland several miles up the Illinois River. Vendors of candy and popcorn, toy balloons and pink lemonade, shouted their wares. A vast merry-go-round wheezed and

sputtered; the promised brass band awoke the river echoes. And, swung in a mighty rank above a row of camp-fires cleverly built in a broad shallow trench, the burgoo kettles sizzled and steamed.

“Burgoo,” the girls soon learned, is the local name for a delicious stew of chicken and bacon and vegetables, cooked slowly for hours, then served in wooden bowls with huge dill pickles and corn pone. Sally Lou, housekeeper born, wheedled the head cook, a courteous, grizzled old negro, into giving her the recipe. Marian, chuckling inwardly, heard his painstaking reply.

“Yes’um. I kin tell you jest how to go about makin’ burgoo. First you want sixteen, maybe twenty, pounds of bacon, cut tolerable fine. Then four dozen chickens won’t be too many. Start your meats a-b’ilin’. Then peel your taters—I used three bushel for this batch. Then put in tomatoes. I reckon two dozen cans might do, though three would be better. Then cabbage, an’ beans, an’ onions, if you like. Two dozen head of cabbage is about right. An’ two bushels of beans——”

Just then Sally Lou dropped her pencil in despair.

"I'll be no more than a head of cabbage myself, if I keep on trying to reduce this recipe to the needs of two people," she groaned in desperation. "Come along, Marian, let's climb on the merry-go-round a while and see if it won't clear my addled brain."

The merry-go-round proved delightfully thrilling, especially to Mr. Finnegan, who rode round and round in a gilded sea-shell, barking himself hoarse in dizzy ecstasy.

Just before noon the crowd, now astonishingly large, gathered at the little running track to watch the sports. First came the sack-races; then the pole-climbing; then the potato-race. Finnegan, by this time delirious with excitement, had to be held down by main force to discourage his wild ambition to take an active part in each event. Last on the programme came the greased-pig race.

Now, the greased-pig race dates back a hundred years and more, to the days when the Kentucky pioneers met for their rare frolics of house-raising or corn-husking. It is a quaint old sport, very

rough, very grimy and breathless, very ridiculously funny. A lively little pig is chosen and greased with melted tallow from head to tail. Then he is set free on the running-track. Half a minute later, the starting-gun booms the signal for his hunters to dash in pursuit. The winner must capture piggy with his bare hands and carry the squirming, slippery armful back to the judges' stand. If piggy escapes en route, the race must be run over again from the very start.

The competitors are boys and young men. Only the fleet-footed can hope for a chance at success. But even as the starter stood calling the race through his big red megaphone, a tall, elderly man shouldered up to their group and hailed Mr. McCloskey.

"Good-day, commodore! You're here to see the greased-pig race? My faith, do you remember the race that we two ran, down in Pike County in '63?"

The commodore beamed at his old neighbor.

"'Deed an' I do. And it was meself that captured that elegant pig, I remember."

"You did that. But it was by accident en-

tirely. For I had all but laid my hand on the pig when you snatched it from under my grasp. I've grudged ye that pig ever since."

The little commodore's eyes snapped. He bristled from the crest of his white head to the toes of his polished boots. His voice took on an ominously silver tone.

"By my word, I'm sorry to learn that that small pig has stood between us all these years, Mister Jennings. If it could give you satisfaction, I'd beg you to run that race over again with me. Or, we might race each other in the contest that is just about to take place. What do ye say?"

For a minute, the astounded Mr. Jennings found nothing whatever to say.

"Now, commodore!" protested gentle Mrs. McCloskey, round-eyed with reproach. "You'd not think of runnin' a half mile this hot noon in the face of all your friends an' neighbors, an' all for one small pig! And you seventy last month, an' that suit of clothes bought new from Saint Louis not the fortnight ago!"

"You don't understand, Mary. I'd run the race

if there was no pig at all under consideration, so it would give my friend Mister Jennings peace of mind," said the little commodore hotly. "What do ye say, sir? Will you join me, an' prove once more which one of us is the rale winner?"

Very red and disconcerted, Mr. Jennings stood on one foot, then the other, in a torture of indecision. Then he threw off his coat.

"I've never taken a dare like that yet, McCloskey. And I don't begin now. Come along."

"Commodore!" Poor Mrs. McCloskey's shocked voice pursued him. But the commodore would not hear. Mr. Jennings was already clambering the rail to the running-track. Lightly as a boy, the commodore vaulted after him. Shoulder to shoulder the two joined the group before the judges' stand.

There ran a ripple of question through the crowd, then a storm of delighted cheers and laughter. Mr. Jennings wriggled in sheepish torment. The commodore, sparkling and debonair, bowed to the throng and hung his Panama on a fence-post.

Then down the running-track fled a small,

shiny black object, squealing in glad escape. Instantly a shot crashed; then came a thundering shout:

“Ready—go!”

With whoops and yells the group of runners raced away down the track. The commodore kept well in the lead. He ran as lightly and as easily as did the boys that forged alongside him. Mr. Jennings puffed and pounded farther in the rear at every turn. They made the first lap of the race. At the second turn the commodore, only third from the lead, waved his hand to Mrs. McCloskey and the girls with a flourish of mischievous triumph. Marian and Sally Lou, tearful and choking with delight, clasped hands and swayed together in helpless rapture. Thus completely absorbed in the spectacle, they let go of Mr. Finnegan's leash.

That was all that Finnegan wanted. With one glad yelp he hurled himself through the fence and bounced like a ball, straight into the midst of the fray. Far in advance fled a shiny black object. Finnegan knew his duty. The commodore was hurrying to catch that object. It was Finnegan's

part to aid in that capture at all costs. Yelping madly, he tore away down the track.

"Oh, it's Finnegan! Oh, the little villain! If I had only left him at home!" Poor Marian strove to call him back. But against the uproar of the crowd her voice could not make a sound. "Oh, the naughty little sinner, he will catch that pig himself and spoil the race for everybody. Look, Sally Lou! He has almost caught up with the pig this minute!"

Even as she spoke, Finnegan, running at top speed, shot ahead of the fleeing pig. Then, with a frenzied bark, he whirled and charged straight at the prize.

This front attack was too much for any pig's self-control. Not content with galloping murderously at his heels, his pursuers had set this ferocious brute to destroy him! With a squeal of mortal panic the little fellow turned right-about and bolted. Shrieking, he dashed back, straight into the crowd of runners.

"Oh—oh! He's right under the commodore's hand! Oh, if he wasn't so slippery— Look, quick, Marian!"

"Well, will you look at that now!" Mrs. McCloskey's mild voice rose in a laugh of triumph. "Sure, I never yet knew the commodore to fail if once he'd set his head to do a thing!"

"If only he can keep fast hold of the pig till he reaches the judges' stand," whispered Sally Lou. All three gazed in pale suspense at the commodore, now striding gayly up the race-track, the pig squirming and squealing wildly in his arms.

"I'm mistrustin' that myself," said Mrs. McCloskey, nervously, "for the little animal is not so convenient to hold, bein' he's so glassy smooth. But trust the commodore. He'll not fail, now."

The commodore did not fail. Calm and majestic, as if he strode a quarter-deck, he paced down the track and halted before the judges' stand, his shrieking prize held high. As the umpire bent forward to give him the champion's blue ribbon, the crowd broke loose. No Olympic victor ever received his laurel in the face of a more enthusiastic tumult.

"I give up," puffed Mr. Jennings, fanning himself with his hat. "You caught that pig fair an' square, commodore. The honors are yours."

"Tut, tut, 'twas no great matter," declared the commodore modestly, as the girls heaped him with praises. "'Twas just a moment's diversion. And it took no skill whatever, though I will own that to carry the little felly back to the judges' stand demanded some effort on me part. You will observe that a pig furnishes but few hand-holds, particularly when he's that slippery and excited-like. Yes, Mary, perhaps we'd best be startin' home, as it's so near sundown."

"Well, but these girls must not go home empty-handed," urged Mrs. McCloskey. "Think of your poor boys, who could not take a day off for the burgoo! We must carry home a taste for them. Go to yonder booth and buy a market-basket, commodore. Then we'll pack in a few samples."

Marian and Sally Lou looked on in silent amaze while Mrs. McCloskey packed the few samples, including a tall jar of the delicious burgoo, a dazzling array of cookies and preserves, and a fat black-currant pie. Meanwhile the commodore was fitting his treasured pig neatly into a small crate, much to the dismay of the pig and the keen joy of a large group of on-lookers.

At last basket and crate were made ready. Tired out by their long, absurd, delightful day, the party settled themselves aboard the commodore's launch and started home. The trip downstream to camp was made in rapid time. It was just dusk when they reached their own landing. Roderick and Ned Burford had heard the commodore's whistle and were waiting to help them ashore.

"What sort of a day was it, Sis?"

"Yes, tell us, quick, if you had any fun. We have put in a gruelling day of it here," added Burford. "Three break-downs on the little dredge and a threatened cave-in on the first lateral! Go on and tell us something cheerful."

Marian and Sally Lou stole a glance backward. The commodore was just putting his boat into mid-stream. He was safely out of earshot. With almost tearful laughter the two girls poured out the story of the day.

"You brought home the best of the day to us," said Ned, as they spread the "samples" on a tiny deck table, picnic-fashion. "We fellows only laid off our levee shifts a few minutes ago. We're

rushing that construction before the creeks rise any higher. So neither of us has eaten a mouthful since noon. This luncheon will taste like manna in the desert. S'pose Mammy Easter would make us a pot of coffee, Sally Lou? Then we could ask no more."

"I'll go to the cabin and coax her to do it. I want a peep at the babies, anyway."

Sally Lou sprang up and started toward the gangway. At the cabin door she stopped short. Her voice rang out, a frightened cry.

"Ned Burford! Come quick! What is that blazing light away up the ditch? Is it— Oh, it is one of the boats—it is the big dredge! And it is on fire!"

Ned Burford leaped up. His startled voice echoed Sally Lou's cry.

"Hallowell! It's the big dredge, the giant Garrison! Wake up and pitch in. Hurry!"

Days afterward Marian would try to recall just what happened during those wild moments; but the whole scene would flicker before her memory, a dizzy blur. She remembered Roderick's shout of alarm; the rush of the day-shift men from

their tents; the clatter of the racing engine as Rod pushed them into the launch, then sent the little boat flying away up the canal. Then, directly ahead, she could see that dense black pillar of smoke rising straight up from the dredge deck, shot through with spurts of flame.

Burford's half-strangled voice came back to them as he groped his way across the deck.

"It's a pile of burning waste, right here by the capstan. Bring the chemical-extinguishers . . . no time to wait for the hose. . . . Wet your coats, boys, and let's pound her out. . . . Whe-ew! I'm 'most strangled. . . . Sally Lou Burford! *You clear out!* You and Marian, too. Go away, I tell you. This is no place for you!"

Sally Lou and Marian stood doggedly in line passing the buckets of water which one of the laborers was dipping up from over the side. Roderick, stolid as a rock, stood close by that choking column of smoke and flame and dashed on the water. Burford rushed about, everywhere at once, half mad with excitement, yet giving orders with unswerving judgment.

"Can't you start the pumping engine, boys?

Swing out that emergency hose, quick. There you are! Now turn that stream on those oil barrels yonder—and *keep* it there. Start the big force-pump and train a stream on the deck near the engines. The fire mustn't spread to the hoisting-gear. Mind that. Mulcahy, give me that chemical-tank. Wet my handkerchief and tie it over my mouth, Sally Lou. No, give me your scarf. That's better. I'm going to wade right in. Aha! See that?"

The smoke column wavered, thinned. A shower of water, soot, and chemicals drenched everybody on deck. Nobody noticed the downpour, for the smoke column was sinking with every moment.

Burford staggered back, half smothered. The extinguisher fell from his hand. But the force-pumps were working now at full blast. Stream after stream of water poured on the fire, then flooded across the deck. Two minutes more of frantic, gasping work and not a spark remained—nothing save the heap of quenched, still smoking waste.

Dazed, Marian found herself once more on the house-boat deck. Ashore the laborers were flock-

ing back to their tents, laughing and shouting. For them it had been a frolic rather than a danger. But the four on the house-boat deck looked at each other without a word. They were too shaky with relief to move or to speak. Sally Lou, the steady-willed, dependable Sally Lou, clung trembling to Marian, who in her turn leaned rather weakly against the rail. Roderick, ashen white, confronted Burford, who stood absently mopping his wet, smarting eyes with Sally Lou's singed and dripping crêpe scarf. Suddenly Burford broke the tension with a strangled whoop.

"Our—our daily reports to the company!" he gurgled. "President Sturdevant wants every day's detail. Let's put it all in. 'I have the honor to report that while your engineers were stoking with burgoo and black-currant pie, Garrison Dredge Number Three was observed to be on fire. Your engineers, assisted by their partners, said engineers' wife and sister, all of whom displayed conspicuous bravery, attacked the fire. Thanks to their heroic efforts, the conflagration was extinguished. I beg further to report that damages are confined to one pile of waste, one smooched

pink silk scarf, and’’—he passed his hand over his smutty forehead—“and one pair of eyebrows.’”

“I’m going straight home to bed,” vowed Marian, as the laughter died away in exhausted chuckles. “This day has brought so many thrilling events that it will take me at least a week to calm myself down. Do let us hope that nothing whatever will happen for a while. I’m longing for monotony—days, months, ages of monotony, at that!”

And, even as she spoke, there was a shout from the pier. Mulcahy came running toward them at top speed.

“Will you look at Mulcahy, sprinting up from the ditch! I’ll wager he has some more bad news for us. Come, Hallowell. Hurry!”

CHAPTER IX

THE MAGIC LEAD-PENCIL

"BAD news, is it?" puffed Mulcahy. "Indeed, sir, I'm sorry to be the one to bring it to you. Lateral Four has caved in again."

"Lateral Four! The cut where we've spent more time and work, filling in, than we've spent anywhere else on the whole ditch!"

"Yes, Lateral Four. The ungrateful piece of fill she is! And when you have shored up the margins with brush, twice over!"

"How far up is the cave-in, Mulcahy?"

"Half a mile from the mouth. Right where Mr. Ellingworth Locke's land begins, sir."

"Right on President Locke's land! Will you hear that, Hallowell? And he's the biggest grumbler in the whole district! And the most powerful grumbler, too. Of all the hard luck!"

"I do hear. And I'm going to get busy." Rod pulled himself together with a grim little

chuckle. "It's an all-night job, Burford. Or else we can add one more calamity to our headquarters report. 'One bad cave-in, on lateral draining land owned by H. R. H., the acting president of the Central Mississippi Association.' Do you see us putting in that cheery news?"

"No, I don't. Not just yet." Burford wiped the last soot-streak from his chin and jumped into the launch. "Here we go!"

"Wait a jiffy, Burford. You'd better stay by the dredge an hour or so. Keep the men at work flooding her deck. We can't be certain-sure that the fire is completely out. There's always a risk."

"That's a fact. You go up to the cave-in and set the levee crews to work. I'll follow in an hour."

Rod started his engine, but Marian stopped him.

"Wait, Rod. Take me up to the lateral, too."

"Take you up to the cave-in, you mean? Why on earth should you go? At this time of night——"

"Because I want to see just what you have to

do. I'm getting very much interested in the work, truly. Please, brother."

"Of all the notions!" Rod looked completely puzzled. Yet a warm little gratified smile brightened his tired face. Again he felt the heart-warming satisfaction that he had felt on the day he had come home, fagged and blue, to find that Marian had sorted all his accounts and cleared up his reports for him. It was wonderfully pleasant to find that his sister could show such real comradeship in his work.

"Of course you shall go with me if you wish, dear. Hop in. Careful!"

"Let me steer, Rod."

"Think you can see all right?"

"With this big search-light? I should hope so. Lie down on the cushions and rest for two minutes. I'll run very carefully."

"Good enough." Rod stretched his weary bones on the seat. At the end of the six-mile run he sat up, with a shamed grin.

"Lazy sinner I am, I dropped off the minute I struck those cushions. My, that snooze makes one thirsty for more! Put the launch inshore, Sis.

Hello there, boys! Is that Dredge A crew? Why, how did you swing the dredge downstream so quickly?"

"We had steam up, so we dropped down the lateral the minute we got word of the cave-in," answered the dredge foreman. "It was Mister Jim Conover who happened by and saw the land-slip, sir. He came a-gallop in' over with his horse all lather, and brought us the news, not fifteen minutes after it happened. Then he called his own hired men and a crowd of neighbors, and they all set to to shore up the bank, above and below the break, with sand-bags and brush. They're workin' at it now, sir, lickety-cut." He pointed up the lateral to a dim glow of torch-light. "Shovellin' away like beavers they are, sir. There won't be another slump in that margin, you can depend on that. They've saved you and the company two days' work and five hundred dollars clear in damages alone, I'm thinkin'."

"Five hundred damages? It would have been nearer a thousand if they hadn't stopped that slide on the double-quick." Roderick sat staring at the hurrying figures in the dull glow of

smoky light. He could hardly grasp this amazing stroke of fortune. "But how—why—I never heard of such a royal piece of kindness!"

"It's all Conover's doing. He said you folks had done mighty neighborly by him, and that he wanted to show his appreciation."

"*Conover!* Why, I never even heard the man's name till now!"

"Conover?" Marian screwed up her forehead. A vague recollection flickered in her mind.

"Yes, sir, Conover. He has a good-sized farm back here a piece. Likely you've forgotten. There's him and his wife and his little girl. Crippled she is, the poor child. Mamie, they call her."

"Mamie Conover— Oh! The poor little soul who was so delighted with your red pencils, Rod! That visitors' Sunday, don't you remember?"

"Oh, to be sure. You're better at remembering than I am, Sis. Well, I'm going up to thank him, this minute. Then we'll ship the dredge into trim and begin digging out the channel again. Think it will take us all night?"

"Now that Conover's gang has stopped the slide so good and square for us, we ought to be

able to cut out and tamp down, too, by daybreak, sir. Maybe sooner. Here comes Conover this minute."

Coated with mud, squashing heavily into the sodden crest of the bank with every step, Conover tramped down the ditch. In that shambling figure, Marian instantly recognized little Mamie's father. Vividly she remembered his deep, weary look at her, the infinite tenderness with which he had lifted the little frail body from her arms.

In the white glare of the search-light, his gaunt face was radiant with friendly concern.

"We've done what little we could, Mr. Hallowell," he said, in reply to Rod's eager thanks. "Little enough at that. But now if you'll put in a few hours' dredging to get out that slide, your ditch will be all right again. Mr. Locke there, whose land borders on this lateral, is a little—well, a little fussy, you know. That's why we fellows kinder butted in and set to work without waitin' to hear from you. Land, it wasn't nothing to thank us for. Just a little troke between neighbors. You here, Miss Hallowell? My buckboard is right up-shore. Can't I drive you to Mr.

Gates's? It's right on my way home—only a mile or so off my road, that is."

"Run along, Sis. Please. It's late and damp, and chilly besides. Scoot, now."

"But I don't want to go, Rod. I want to stay and see the dredge make the cut over again. This is the most interesting performance I ever dreamed of."

"I'd much rather have you go home, old lady. You can't see much in this half-light. And you can't help me. Worse, you'll catch cold sure and certain." Yet that odd little glow warmed Rod's heart once more. It was a wonderful satisfaction to hear Marian speak with such keen interest of his beloved work.

"Well, then—" reluctantly Marian scrambled ashore. Mr. Conover wiped his muddy hands on the lap-robe and helped her into the buckboard, with awkward care. They drove swiftly away, up the wide country road, between the dark, level fields.

Neither spoke for some minutes. At last Marian began, rather clumsily, to tell him of their exciting day.

The man made no comment. Still more clumsily, she tried to thank him for his generous and timely aid to Roderick.

Suddenly Mr. Conover turned to her. In the faint starlight she saw that his dull face was working painfully.

"So you want to thank me for this job, eh? Why, if I'd done ten times as much, I wouldn't have begun to do what I want to do for you and your brother. I've been aimin' to come over and tell you, long ago. But seems like I never get around to it. Don't you mind about them red pencils?"

"Those red and blue pencils of Rod's, you mean? What of them?"

"What of them? My, if you could see Mamie with them, you wouldn't ask!" The color burned in his thin face. His eyes were shining now. "They're the one pleasure that ain't never failed her. If I could ever tell you what they've meant! I've sent to the city and bought her three or four dozen assorted, so's to be sure she never gets short of all the colors. No matter how bad her back hurts, she'll set there in her pillows and mark

away, happy's a kitten. Seems like long's she's workin' with those pencils, she forgets everything, even the pain. And that's the best we can ever do for our baby." His voice broke on a terrible and piteous note. "The only thing we can do—help her forget."

There was a long silence.

"An' then you talk as if what I did to-night could count for anything—alongside of *that!*"

Marian's own lips were quivering. She did not dare to reply.

Yet as she put out her bedroom candle and stood looking out on the dark starlit woods, the narrow black ribbon of the canal, a whimsical wonder stirred in her thought.

"I'll tell Rod to-morrow that his red pencils must have the credit of it all. It's the story of the little Dutch hero who stuffed his thumb into the crack in the dike and saved the city, right over again. Only this time it's something even tinier than a thumb that has saved the day. It's just a little red lead-pencil. And, oh, how glad I am for Roderick's sake! The dear, stodgy old slow-coach, I'm proud of every inch of his success.

Though maybe Slow-Coach isn't just the fitting name for Rod nowadays. Sometimes the slow coaches are the very ones that win the race—in the long run."

CHAPTER X

HONORED GUESTS

MARIAN'S wish for quiet and monotonous days was promptly granted. Only too promptly and too thoroughly, she owned ruefully. The next morning dawned bleak and gray, with a chill east wind and a driving rain. Held prisoner in the house by the storm, Marian amused herself through the long dreary day as best she could. At supper-time, feeling very lonely indeed, she called Roderick up on the telephone; but their long-distance visit gave her little satisfaction.

Roderick had spent a hard day, hurrying from one lateral to another, crowding the levee work to the highest possible speed; for in this wide-spread rain the creeks to the north were rising an inch an hour, and every inch meant danger to his half-built embankments. Marian sympathized eagerly and declared that she would come down to the canal the next day and help him with his reports.

"Not if it rains you won't," croaked Roderick hoarsely. "Don't let me catch you outside the house. You'll catch cold just as I have done, wading through this swamp. Mind, now. Don't you dare leave the farm-house unless it clears."

Marian promised. When the morning came, dark and drizzly, she found it hard to keep her word. The hours went on leaden feet. The down-pour never slackened. It was impossible for her to go out-doors even as far as the driveway. In that flat, low country a two-days' rain means an inundation. Meadows and fields were like flooded marshes. Sheets of water spread through the orchards; the yard paths were so many brooks, the barn-yard was an infant lake.

"It won't last very long," Mrs. Gates consoled her. "A year ago we'd have been heart-broken at the sight of such a rain. It would have meant ruin for all the crops. The surplus water would not have drained off in a fortnight. But since they began digging the ditches, we know that our crops will be safe, even if it rains for a week."

"I'm glad to learn that Rod's hard work counts for something," said Marian impatiently. She

flattened her downcast face against the pane. "In the meantime, I feel like a marooned pirate. If I can't get out of doors for some fresh air before long, I'll develop a pirate's disposition, too."

At dusk she tried again to call Roderick on the telephone, to demand sympathy for her imprisonment. But to her astonishment she could get no reply from central.

"The wires are all down, I dare say," said Mrs. Gates cheerfully. "It'll be three or four days before the line-men can get around to repair damages. The roads are hub deep. No telling when they can haul their repair wagons through. You'll see."

Marian did see. The district roads had been all but impassable ever since her coming. Now, thanks to this downpour, they would be bottomless pits of mire.

"Well! It's worse this morning, if anything," Mrs. Gates announced cheerfully, as Marian appeared on the third gray morning. "'Pears to me that you won't get out-doors again before the Fourth of July."

“But I must have some air. I can’t stay cooped up forever,” cried Marian. “If you’d only lend me your rubber boots, Mrs. Gates; the ones you wear when you’re gardening. Then I could put on my mackintosh and my rubber bathing-cap and splash about beautifully. Besides, I must go down to the canal. I must see how Rod is getting on. Think, it has been two days since I have heard one word from him. Yet he is barely two miles away!”

Mrs. Gates yielded at last to her coaxing. Soon Marian started out, wearing the borrowed boots and Mr. Gates’s oil-skin coat. She stumbled and splashed away through the dripping woods, with Finnegan romping gayly behind. Rainy weather held no melancholy for Finnegan. Shut in the house, he had made those three days memorable for the household, especially for poor irate Empress, who had taken refuge at last on the top rafter of the corn-bin. On the way to camp he flushed three rabbits, chased a fat gray squirrel into chattering fury, and dragged Marian knee-deep into a bog, in his wild eagerness to dig out an imaginary woodchuck.

"I wish I had a little of your vim, Finnegan." Marian sat down, soaked and breathless, on the step of Sally Lou's martin-box. From that eminence she surveyed the canal and its swarms of laborers. Her eyes clouded.

In spite of her growing interest in Roderick's work, to look upon that work always puzzled her and disheartened her. The slow black water; the ugly mud-piled banks; the massive engines throbbing night and day through a haze of steam; the gigantic dredge machines, swinging their great steel arms back and forth, up and down, lifting tons of earth from the bottom of the ditch and placing it on the waiting barge with weird, unerring skill. Most of all, the heavy tide of hurry and anxiety that seemed to rise higher every day. All these things vexed her and harassed her. When Rod talked over his work with her with all his eager enthusiasm, she could share his triumph or lament his disappointment, as the case might be. But the work itself was so huge, so complicated, that she could never quite grasp it. She could never understand her brother's passionate interest.

"Although I don't despise the very sight of

camp, as I did at first," she reflected. "It is rather queer that I don't, too. Perhaps one can get used to anything. And I do want to learn more about Rod's work, for he loves it so dearly, and I know he wants me to enjoy it too. Though how anybody can enjoy such a life! To spend day after day, month on month, toiling like a slave in a steaming marsh like this!"

A brisk finger tapped on the window-pane above her.

"Come in, Miss Northerner! Poor dear, you're all but drowned. Stand on the oil-cloth and drip till Mammy can help you to take off those boots and put on my slippers."

Marian entered the dry, warm little house with a sigh of pleasure. Presently she sat at the window with Thomas Tucker bouncing on her knee. Thomas Tucker had charms that could cheer the most pensive spirit. Yet Marian stared soberly past his bobbing yellow head at the swarming camp below.

"Don't look so droopy, Miss Northerner. Perk up, do!" Sally Lou gave her ear a gentle nip. "You and I will have to manufacture cheerfulness

in car-load lots this week, to counterbalance our partners' gloom."

"Why? Have the boys met with more ill-luck on the contract?"

"More ill-luck!" Sally Lou checked off point by point on her slim fingers. "Day before yesterday—the morning after the fire—the district inspector was due here to pass judgment on the two upper laterals. As you know, the contract provides that the inspector must look over every yard of excavation and approve it before it can be considered as actually done. Lo and behold, no inspector appeared. The boys were wild with anxiety to start their levee-work before the rain should wash the soft new banks down into the canal; for the company is responsible for every cave-in, and every slide of land means double labor in digging all that soil out of the ditch again. By noon the inspector had not been heard from, but two small cave-ins had occurred, and the company was losing money at the rate of thirty dollars an hour, because of the enforced idleness of the laborers and the shutting down of the machinery. Finally Roderick took his launch and

started out in search of the inspector. At Grafton he managed to get telephone connections with his office, and he was cheerfully assured that the inspector would appear on the scene 'as soon as the rain stops.'"

"'As soon as the rain stops?' Why, Sally Lou! Then he hasn't come at all!"

"Precisely. Back came poor Rod, very cross and doleful indeed. Then he and Ned gave up work on the laterals and set the men to hacking away at the regular excavation. The laborers are sulky accordingly. Yesterday they threatened a strike. I don't blame them. The bank-cutting is all very well in dry weather, but in this rain it is a miserable task."

"Well, Rod can keep the men pacified. He's a splendid manager."

"Yes; and the men like him. But the work is terribly wearing on both the boys. And the third calamity arrived last night. The dipper-handle broke."

"The dipper-handle? On the big dredge? Sally Lou, how dreadful!"

"Yes, it is dreadful. It means, of course, that

twenty of the laborers will stop work and enjoy a vacation at the company's expense while the new handle is being made and put in. Luckily the boys have one set of duplicate chains and timbers, and the company blacksmith is wonderfully capable. But it will cost the company a lump loss of a thousand dollars. Imagine, Marian, how those poor boys will groan when they make out their week's reports for President Sturdevant. 'One fire. One delay and two cave-ins, due to non-appearance of district inspector. One strike. One smashed dipper-handle.' Think what a dismal task the writing of that report will be!"

"Don't let me hear any more croaking, Sally Lou," came a wrathful voice from the door. "For we're facing the worst smash yet. What do you suppose this telegram says?"

Sally Lou shook a small fist at the yellow slip in his hand.

"Don't you dare tell me that it's some new misfortune!"

"Two of 'em. That lordly, gloomy grouch, Mr. Ellingworth Locke, acting president of the Central Mississippi Association, is headed for this luck-

less camp. He's on his way up-river this identical minute. With him comes Crosby. Crosby, consulting engineer for the whole Valley Association. Coming on a tour of inspection, *if* you please. Just think of the lovely job that they have come a thousand miles to inspect!"

There was a stricken pause.

"President Locke! That—that potentate! Ned, you don't mean it! And Mr. Crosby, whose word is law on every question of engineering!"

"And they're coming to-day! To 'inspect' this soaking, miry, half-baked camp!"

"And just this minute I've had some more news, Burford." Roderick bolted up the steps and entered the room. He tried to wrench his face into a reassuring grin; but beneath the grin he was the picture of angry dismay. "A big white launch is just coming up the canal, with two passengers aboard. If I'm not mistaken, they are our honored guests. Come along, Burford, and help me welcome them."

Burford, pop-eyed with amazement, meekly obeyed. Wordless, the two girls watched the boys pelt away toward the landing.

“Well!”

Sally Lou and Marian looked at each other eloquently.

“Well! I could find it in my heart to wish that the boys were not obliged to unfold quite so many tales of misery! Then the broken machinery and the quarrelling laborers! But we mustn’t let ourselves fidget over it, Marian. It will come out all right, somehow.”

Roderick and Burford pounded down to the shore. The white launch was just putting into the landing. At the bow sat Mr. Ellingworth Locke, wrapped in a huge storm coat. Evidently he was scolding the launch pilot with some energy. Behind him stood Crosby, his gray, keen eyes searching every inch of the ditch construction.

“His Jove-like Majesty looks even grumpier than usual,” whispered Burford the irreverent. “Come along, Hallowell. It is our professional duty to welcome them with heart and soul.”

“Mr. Burford?” Mr. Locke stepped upon the landing and put out a plump gloved hand. “Ah, Mr. Hallowell? How goes it? We hope that you

have no ill news of the contract to give us." He led the way up the shore, with ponderous dignity. "The three contracts in central Illinois, which we have just inspected, have shown deplorable results from the high water. I trust that you have no such misfortunes to report."

"We haven't anything but misfortunes to report," muttered Burford. Aloud he said, "We have not been able to bring the work to the desired point, sir. We have had several accidents and delays. If you can face the discomforts of a boat trip in this rain, perhaps you will make a tour of inspection and see how matters stand."

The honorable Mr. Locke hesitated. The canal looked very muddy and uninviting. The sky was black with rain clouds.

"Perhaps it would be as well for us to confer with you. Then we could go back to Saint Louis immediately."

"Beg pardon, Mr. Locke." Mr. Crosby spoke for the first time. His gray face had no particular expression; but his voice held an oddly pleasant note. "You go back right away, if you like. But I'll look over this excavation with my own eyes.

I want to discuss it with the executive committee day after to-morrow."

"Oh, of course, if you insist!" Mr. Locke turned impatiently to Burford. "Where is your boat, sir? Let us start at once."

That tour of inspection! Silent, humiliated, miserable, Roderick and Burford plodded after the two Olympians, up and down the narrow laterals, back and forth through the maze of seeping, half-cut channels. Every question that they must answer told of some unlucky happening. Every report was apologetic, unsatisfactory.

"This ruinous high water isn't our fault. Neither is Carlisle's illness, nor the broken dipper-handle, nor the district inspector's delay. Just the same I feel like a penny-in-the-slot machine for grinding out explanations," whispered Roderick to Burford. Burford merely scowled in reply.

Thus far, Mr. Crosby had had nothing to say. He strode on ahead, his keen eyes judging, his shrewd mouth shut hard. President Locke made up for his silence. He hectored the boys with fretful questions and complaints. He criticised the laborers, the equipment, the weather.

"Your company's losses, indeed! The Breckenridge Company will be fortunate, Mr. Burford, if, under the present management, this contract does not bring forfeitures as well as loss. As for the land-owners in this district, their dissatisfaction can be only too readily imagined."

Just then the president caught Mr. Crosby's eye.

"Do you not agree with me, Mr. Crosby? Is not this a most disheartening outlook? On my word, sir, the company has no chance to complete those laterals before the great June freshets. That calamity will mean ruin for the farmers and for the contract alike. To finish this work would be difficult with a full quota of experienced men. And with only cub engineers—" He threw out both fat hands, with a gesture of despairing scorn.

Burford bit his lip and turned fiery red with mortification. Roderick's stolid face did not flinch. But his heart sank leaden to his miry boots. What an infuriating humiliation for the company! His company, the pride of his boy heart! And Breckenridge, Breck his hero, would have to hear it all!

"You think it's as bad as all that?" Mr.

Crosby spoke with slow, bland unconcern. Then he looked at the two boys. For one moment his lean gray face lighted with a curious, kindly sparkle. "H'm! Strikes me that their company is mighty lucky to have cub engineers employed on this job."

"'Lucky?' Why, sir? Why?"

"Well, because they're the only kind that any company can depend upon to have nerve enough and grit enough to swing such a forlorn hope of a contract through."

He tramped on, up the landing. Burford threw back his shoulders. The blood flamed to his ears. Roderick's heart suddenly leaped up to its normal altitude and began to pound. His lagging feet swung into a jaunty stride. He met Burford's red, delighted face with a shamefaced grin. That vote of confidence had fairly set them afire.

"At what time had we best start back to Saint Louis?" asked Mr. Locke.

"By leaving camp at nine-thirty you will meet the north-bound limited at Grafton, sir."

"Then, Crosby, we will stay here until that hour. But where shall we dine?"

"It will be a pleasure to Mrs. Burford and myself if you and Mr. Crosby will dine with us at our cabin," interposed Burford eagerly.

The stout potentate graciously accepted, and Burford fled to break the news to Sally Lou.

"Mercy, Sally Lou, how can you manage it!" cried Marian, as Burford popped his head through the window, shouted his news, then hastily departed. "How on earth can you entertain such high mightinesses?"

"Well, I should hope that I could give them one meal at least."

"But you haven't enough dishes. That is, you haven't cups that match——"

"Cups that match, indeed! H'm. They can be thankful to get any cups at all in this wilderness. I've promised Mammy Easter my pink beads if she'll make us some beaten biscuit, and I have sent Mulcahy to Mrs. Gates's for three chickens, and I'll open two jars of my white peach preserve. I don't care if they're the Grand Mogul and the Czar of all the Russias, they can surely condescend to eat Mammy's fried chicken."

"Yes, they'll be sure to like chicken," conceded Marian.

"They'd better like it. It's all they're going to get. Chicken and potatoes and biscuit, preserves and coffee, that's all. Yes, and lashin's and lavin's of cream gravy. It'll be fit for a king. Even his Highness, the acting president, won't dare complain!"

If any complaints as to Sally Lou's hospitality were spoken, they were not audible to the human ear. As Roderick said afterward, it was fortunate that nobody kept the beaten biscuit score; while one grieves to relate that in spite of Sally Lou's generous preparation, poor Mammy Easter was obliged to piece out an exceedingly skimpy meal from the fragments of the supper, instead of the feast that she had anticipated. Even the pink beads proved a barely adequate consolation.

The hour that followed, spent before the Burfords' tiny hearth-fire, was the best of all. For a while, the men worked over the mass of blue-prints that recorded the excavation made during the month past. Here President Locke, the magnificent figure-head, gave way, promptly and

meekly, before Crosby's wider experience. Roderick and Burford listened, all ears, to the elder man's shrewd illuminating comment, his quiet suggestion, his amused friendly sympathy. Both groaned inwardly when the launch whistled from below, a warning that their guests must be off to meet the north-bound train.

President Locke bowed over Sally Lou's hand with majestic courtesy.

"A most delightful hour you have given us, Mrs. Burford. We shall remember it always and with deep pleasure. But one thing is lacking in your hospitality. You have not given us the special pleasure of meeting your young sons."

Then Sally Lou, the poised stately young hostess, colored pink to her curly fair hair.

"It is high time that my sons were sound asleep," said she. "But if you really wish to see them, and can overlook their informal attire, Mammy Easter shall bring them in."

In came two small podgy polar bears, wide-eyed at the marvel of company, and up-at-Nine-o'clock, dimpling, crimson-cheeked. Roderick and Burford stood gaping, to behold their august su-

periors now stooping from their heights to beguile small Edward and shy Thomas Tucker with clumsy blandishments.

"*Where* did you learn to handle a baby like that?" gasped Sally Lou, so astonished at Mr. Crosby's dexterous ease that she forgot all convention.

"Six of my own," returned the eminent engineer, capably shifting small, slippery Thomas Tucker on his gaunt shoulder. "All grown up, I regret to say. My baby girl is a junior at Smith this year. Try him. Isn't he a stunner for a year old?" He plumped the baby into the arms of the lordly president, who was already jouncing Edward Junior on his knee and showing him his watch.

"A whale," approved President Locke, with impressive emphasis. He stood up, gaining his footing with some difficulty; for both the babies were now clambering over him delightedly, while Finnegan yapped and nipped his ankles with cordial zest. "I wish we might spend another hour with these most interesting members of your household, Mr. Burford." His stern, arrogant face was beaming; he was no longer the exacting offi-

cial, but the gracious, kindly gentleman. "Since we must go, we will leave behind us our good wishes, as well as our thanks for your most charming hospitality. And we will take with us"—his eye sought Mr. Crosby's; there passed between the two men a quick, satisfied glance—"we shall take with us our hearty certainty that these good wishes for your husband's work, as well as for his household, will be abundantly fulfilled."

In the flickering torchlight of the landing Roderick and Ned watched their launch start away. Then they looked at each other.

"Well! Do you feel like tackling your job again, Burford?"

"Feel like tackling it!" Ned chuckled, softly. "When I know they're going to give their executive committee a gilt-edged report of our company and its work! When Crosby himself said that we were the right men on the right job! Feel like tackling it? Give me a shovel and I'll tackle the Panama Canal."

CHAPTER XI

A LONG PULL AND A STRONG PULL

"WHAT is the latest bulletin, Sally Lou?"

Ned Burford, hot, muddy, breathless, ran up the martin-box steps and put his head inside the door.

Sally Lou sat at Ned's desk, her brown eyes intent, her cheeks a little pale. A broad map lay spread before her. One hand steadied small Thomas Tucker, who clung against her knee. The other hand grasped the telephone receiver.

"What's the news, I say? Doesn't central answer? Wires down again, do you s'pose?"

"Yes, central answered, and we reached the operator at Bates Creek an hour ago. She says that the smaller streams below Carter's Ford have not risen since daybreak, but that Bates Creek itself has risen three inches in the last four hours."

"Whew! Three inches since morning! That sounds serious. What about Jackson River?"

"Below Millville the Jackson has flooded its banks. Above Millville the men are patrolling the levees and stacking in sand bags and brush to reinforce the earthwork."

"That means, another crest of water will reach us to-morrow, early. Well, we are ready to face it, I'm thankful to say." Ned settled back in his big chair with a sigh of relief. "That is, unless it should prove to be more than a three-foot rise. And there is practically no danger that it will go beyond that stage. Our upper laterals are excavated to final depth. Our levee is growing like magic, and Hallowell is putting in splendid time on the lower laterals with the big dredge. So we needn't worry. As soon as he finishes all the lateral excavation, he will bring the dredges down to the main ditch and start in to deepen the channel to its final depth. When that second excavation is done, the channel will allow for a six-foot rise. That channel depth, of course, will put us far out of any danger of overflow. Then when the June floods come, the creeks can rise four inches or forty inches if they like. We won't care."

Sally Lou looked sharply at his grimy, cheerful

face. Her own did not reflect his contentment. She put down the receiver and bent frowning over the map. Her pencil wandered over the maze of fine red lines that marked the excavation.

"Hallowell and I had nothing but bad luck on this contract until two weeks ago, when Locke and Crosby came on their inspection tour," Ned went on serenely. "But since their visit, we've had two solid weeks of the best fortune any engineer could ask. It has been almost too good; it's positively uncanny. Not a break in the machinery; only one cave-in, and that a trifle; not a solitary quarrel among the laborers—the shifts have moved like clock-work. It was Crosby's doing, I suppose. His coming heartened us all up; all of us; even to the dredges themselves. Though, on my word, Sally Lou, I'm almost afraid of such unchanging good luck. It's no' canny."

Sally Lou turned to him suddenly. Her fingers tapped the desk with nervous little clicks.

"Listen, Ned. Have you finished the upper laterals? Are they safe, no matter how high the water may rise?"

"N-no. They are excavated, but the bank is nothing but heaped mud, you know. Still, it would stand anything short of a flood."

"What about the lower laterals?"

"Same state of affairs there. Only that the two lowest ditches aren't cut at all. Why?"

Sally Lou swung round in the desk chair and faced her husband. Her eyes were very dark and anxious now.

"One more question, Ned. Could the work stand a three-foot rise?"

Ned stared.

"A three-foot rise? No, it could not. A three-foot rise would stop our levee-building. A rise of four feet or more would put us out of the game. We'd be washed out, smashed, ruined. But why do you ask such questions? What makes you imagine——"

"I'm not imagining, Ned. I had a telephone call not five minutes ago from the district inspector. Yes, I know you think he's always shouting 'Wolf!' but this time he may be right. He says that he has just come down from Chicago on the Central, and that the whole mid-section of the State is fairly

submerged by these endless rains. Worse, the storm warnings are up for further rains. And he believes that there will be a rise of three feet within two days. That is, unless the rains stop."

Ned started to his feet.

"A rise of three feet! What is the man talking about? Don't you believe one word, Sally Lou. That inspector is a regular hoot-owl. He'd rather gloom and forebode than breathe. But maybe I'd better go and tell Hallowell. Perhaps we can ginger up our excavation. Yet the men and the machines are working up to their limit."

He shuffled into his wet oilskins once more.

"Where is Roderick, Ned?"

"He just came in off his watch. He's sound asleep in the hammock over at his shack. Marian is over there too. She made Mr. Gates bring her down at five this morning, and she has worked like a Turk every minute. She spent the morning with Hallowell, up the laterals. She has learned to run his launch better than he can, so he lets her manage the boat for him. Then she takes all his notes, and does all his telephoning, and passes along his orders to the commissary men, and seconds

him at every turn. Did you ever in all your life see anybody change as she has done? When I remember the listless, useless, fretful specimen that she was, those first weeks, then look at her now, I can hardly believe my eyes."

Sally Lou listened a little impatiently.

"Yes, I know. Ned, please go and tell Roderick about the inspector's message. He surely ought to know."

"All right, I'm going." Ned put down his frolicking small sons reluctantly. Sally Lou laughed at his unwilling face. Yet she looked after him anxiously as he sauntered away. Then her eyes turned to the brimming canal. Tree branches and bits of lumber, washed down from the upper land by the heavy storm, rolled and tumbled past. The sky was thick and gray, the wind blew straight from the east.

"I hate to fidget and forebode. But I—I almost wish that I could make Ned forebode a little. I'm afraid he ought to worry. And Roderick ought to be a little anxious, too."

Suddenly the telephone bell rang. Sally Lou sprang to answer it.

"Yes, this is the contract camp. A Chicago call? Is it— Is it head-quarters? Oh, is this *Mr. Breckenridge* who is speaking? Shall I call Mr. Burford?"

Strong and clear across two hundred miles of storm the voice reached her, a hurrying command.

"Do not call your husband. No time. Operator says the wind raging here may break connections at any minute. Tell him that we have positive word that a tremendous rise is on the way. A cloudburst north of Huntsville started this new crest two hours ago. Moreover, a storm belt extends across the State, covering a district thirty miles wide directly north of you. Tell our engineers to spare neither money nor effort in making ready. Tell them, whatever else they must neglect, to save——"

Click!

The receiver dropped from Sally Lou's shaking hand. Not another sound came over the wire. She signalled frantically.

"Oh, if he had only told me! 'To save'—to save *what*? The machinery, the levee, the laterals— Oh, central, please, please!"

Still no sound. At last central's voice, a thin little whisper.

"Chicago connections broken . . . terrible storm . . . sorry can't reach——"

The thin little whisper dropped to silence.

"Mammy, take these babies. I'm going away." Sally Lou rolled Thomas Tucker off her lap and dashed away to Roderick's shack. Trembling, she poured out her ill news.

"This means business." Roderick, heavy-eyed and stupid, struggled into hip boots and slicker. "Breckenridge isn't frightening us for nothing. We daren't lose a minute. Come along, Burford."

"Come along—where?" Burford stood stunned before this bewildering menace. "What more can we do? Aren't we rushing the whole plant to the danger notch of speed as it is?"

"There is one thing we must do. Decide what part of the work we can abandon. Then put our whole force, men, machinery, and all, to work at the one point where it will do the most good."

"What can we abandon? It's all equally important."

"That is for you and me to decide. Come along."

"If Breck had only finished his sentence! 'To save—' Surely he meant for us to save the dredges?"

Again the boys looked at each other.

"To save the dredges, maybe. But that doesn't sound like Breckenridge. 'To save the land-owners from loss,' that's more like what he'd say."

"If we could only reach him, for even half a minute——"

"That is precisely what we can't do." Roderick's big shoulders lifted. His heavy face settled into lines of steel. "We'll bring all three of the machines down stream, and put up our fight on the main ditch. If we can cut through to the river, before the rise gets here, we will save the crops for most of the land-owners, anyway. That will check any danger of the water backing up into the narrow laterals and overflowing them."

Burford frowned.

"Do you realize that by making that move we shall risk wrecking the dredges? We will have to

tow them down in this rough, high water against this heavy wind. We may smash and sink all three. And they cost the company a cool twenty thousand apiece, remember."

Roderick's jaw set.

"I realize just that. But it is up to us to decide. If we stop our excavation and huddle the machines back into the laterals, we will save our equipment from any risk. But the overflow will sweep the whole lower district and ruin every acre of corn. On the other hand, if we bring the dredges down here and start in full tilt to deepen the channel, we may wreck our machines—and we may not. But, whatever happens, we will be giving the land-owners a chance."

Burford held back, but only for a moment. Then he put out his hand to Roderick, with a slow grin.

"I'm with you, Hallowell. I'll take your lead, straight through. It's up to us, all right. We've got to shoulder the whole responsibility, the whole big, hideous risk. But we'll put it through. That's all."

Together the boys hurried away. Left behind,

the girls set to work upon their share of the plan with eager spirit.

"You go with the boys and run the launch for them, Marian. I'll turn the babies over to Mammy and stay right here to watch the telephone and keep the time-books, although time-books could wait, in such a pinch as this. We'll all pull together. And we will pull out safely, never fear."

Sally Lou was right. They all pulled together. Machines, laborers, foremen and all swung splendidly into line. As Ned said, the contract had never shown such team-work. Everybody worked overtime. Everybody faced the rain, the mud, the merciless hurry with high good-humor. The thrill of danger, the daring risk, the loyal zeal and spirit for the company, all spurred them on.

Side by side with Roderick, Marian worked through the day. She had long since forgotten her frail health. She had forgotten her hatred of the dun western country, her dislike of Roderick's work, her weariness, her impatience. With heart and soul she stood by her brother. Only the one wish ruled every act: her eager desire to

help Roderick, to stand by him through to the end of this tremendous strain.

"We'll make it!" Roderick grinned at her, tired but content, as he came into the shack for his late supper. "Sally Lou finally reached Springfield on the telephone. The rain has stopped; so while the rise will come, sure as fate, yet it may not be as high as Breckenridge feared. At any rate, we have made splendid time with the big dredge to-day. There is barely an eighth of a mile more cutting to be done. Then we'll reach the river, and we'll be safe, no matter what freshets may happen along. Burford says I'm to take six hours' sleep; then I'll go on watch again. Twelve more hours of working time will see our land-owners secure."

"Ned Burford is running up the shore this minute." Marian peered through the tent flap. "Mulcahy is coming with him. They're in a hurry. I wonder what has happened."

"They'd better not bring me any bad news till I have eaten my supper," said Roderick grimly.

Burford and Mulcahy galloped up the knoll. Headlong they plunged into the tent. Burford

was gray-white. Mulcahy stared at Roderick without a word.

"What has happened? Burford, what ails you?"

Burford sat down and mopped his sweating forehead.

"The worst break-down yet, Hallowell. The dipper-bail on the big dredge has snapped clear through."

The three stared at each other in helpless despair. Marian broke the silence.

"The dipper-bail broken *again*? Why, it's not two weeks since you put on the new handle!"

"True for you, miss. Not two weeks since it broke," said Mulcahy wrathfully. "And its smash means a tie-up all along the line. Not one stroke of ditch-work can be done till it's replaced. Who ever saw a dipper break her bail twice on the same job? 'Tis lightnin' strikin' twice in the same place. But 'tis no use cryin' over spilt milk. One of you gentlemen will have to go to Saint Louis and have a new bail welded at the steam forge. It will cost twenty-four hours' time, but it is the only way. I'll keep the boys hot at work on the levee construction meanwhile."

"Go to Saint Louis to-night! And neither of you two have had a night's sleep this week!" Marian looked at Burford. His sodden clothes hung on him. His round face was pinched and sunken with fatigue. She looked at her brother. He had slumped back in his chair, limp and haggard. He was so utterly tired that even the shock of ill news could not rouse him to meet its challenge.

Then she looked out at the weltering muddy canal, the dark stormy sky.

"Never mind, Rod. We'll manage. You and Ned make out the exact figures and dimensions for the new bail. Then Mulcahy can take me to Grafton in the launch. There I'll catch the Saint Louis train. I'll go straight to the steam forge and urge them to make your bail at once. Then I'll bring it back on the train to-morrow night."

Promptly both boys burst into loud, astonished exclamations.

"Go to Saint Louis alone! I guess I see myself letting you do such a preposterous thing. I'll start, at once."

"Stop that, Hallowell. You can't possibly go.

You're so sleepy that you haven't half sense. I'll go myself."

"Oh, you will. Then what about your watch to-night? Shall I take it and my own, too?"

Burford stopped, quenched. He reddened with perplexity.

"We can't either of us be spared, that's the fact of it. But Miss Marian must not think of going."

"Certainly not. I would never allow it."

"Yes, Rod, you will allow it." Marian spoke quietly, but with determination. "The trip to Saint Louis is perfectly safe. Once in the city, I'll take a carriage to the College Club and stay there every minute, except the time that I must spend in giving orders for the bail. No, you two need not look so forbidding. I'm going. And I'm going this identical minute."

Later Marian laughed to remember how swiftly she had overruled every protest. The boys were too tired and dazed to stand against her. It was hardly an hour before she found herself flying down the river, in charge of the faithful Mulcahy, on her way to catch the south-bound train.

"The steam-forge people will do everything

in their power to serve you," Roderick had said, as he scrawled the last memoranda for her use. "They know our firm, and they will rush the bail through and have it loaded on the eight-o'clock train. I'll see to it that Mulcahy and two men are at the Grafton dock to meet your train. But if anything should go wrong, Sis, just you hunt up Commodore McCloskey and ask him to help you; for the commodore is our guardian angel, I am convinced of that."

The trip to the city was uneventful. She awoke early, after a good rest, and hurried down to the forge works, a huge smoky foundry near the river. The shop foreman met her with the utmost courtesy and promised that the bail should be made and delivered aboard the afternoon train. Feeling very capable and assured, Marian went back to the club and had spent two pleasant hours in its reading-room when she was called to the telephone.

"Miss Hallowell?" It was the voice of the forge works foreman. "I—er—most unluckily we have mislaid the slip of paper which gave the dimensions of the bail. We cannot go on

until we have those dimensions. Do you remember the figures?"

Poor Marian racked her brain. Not one measurement could she call to mind.

"I'll ask my brother over the long-distance," she told the foreman. But even as she spoke, she knew that there was no hope of reaching Roderick. All the long-distance wires were down.

"And not one human being in all Saint Louis who can tell me the size of that bail!" she groaned. "Oh, why didn't I measure it with my own tape-measure—and then learn the figures by heart! Yet—I do wonder! Would Commodore McCloskey know? He has been at the camp so often, and he knows everything about our machinery. Let's see."

Presently Commodore McCloskey's friendly voice rang over the wire.

"Well, sure 'tis good luck that ye caught me at the dock, Miss Marian. The *Lucy* is just startin' up-river. Two minutes more and I'd have gone aboard. So ye've lost the bail dimensions? Well, well, don't talk so panicky-like. I'll be with ye in two minutes, an' we'll go to the forge together.

'Tis no grand memory I have, but I can give them a workin' idea."

"Oh, if you only will, commodore! But the *Lucy*! How can you be spared?"

"Hoot, toot. The *Lucy* can wait while I go shoppin' with you. Yes, she has a time schedule, I know well. But, in high wather, whoever expects a Mississippi packet to be on time? Or in low wather, either, for that matter. I'll come to ye at once."

The commodore was as good as his word. Soon he and Marian reached the forge works. There his shrewd observation and his wise old memory suggested dimensions which proved later to be correct in every detail. Moreover, he insisted upon staying with Marian till the bail should be welded. Then, under his sharp eyes, it was loaded safely on the Grafton train. As he escorted Marian elegantly into the passenger coach, she ventured, between her exclamations of gratitude, to reprove him very gently.

"You have been too good to me, commodore. But when I think of the poor deserted *Lucy*! And the captain—what will he say?"

"He'll say a-plenty." The little commodore smiled serenely. "'Tis an unchivalrous set the steam-boat owners are, nowadays. If he were half as obligin' as the old captains used to be in the good days before the war, he'd be happy to wait over twenty-four hours, if need be, to serve a lady. But nowadays 'tis only time, time that counts. Sure, he's grieved to the heart if we make a triflin' loss, like six hours, say, in our schedule."

"And I'm not thanking you for myself alone," Marian went on, flushing. "It is for Rod, too. You don't know how much it means to me to be able to help him, even in this one small way."

Then the little commodore bent close to her. His shrewd little eyes gleamed.

"Don't I know, sure? An' by that token I'm proud of this day, and twice proud of the chance that's led me to share it. For, sure, I've always said it—the time would certain come when you—*when you'd wake up*. Mind my word, Miss Marian. Don't ye forget! Don't ye let go—and go to sleep again."

The train jarred into motion. His knotted little hand gripped hers. Then he was off and away.

"The dear little, queer little commodore!" Marian looked after him, her eyes a bit shadowy. "Though what could he mean! 'Now you've waked up.' I do wonder!"

Yet her wonder was half pretended. A hot flush burned in her cheek as she sat thinking of his words.

"Well, I'm glad, too, that I've 'waked up,' although I wish that something had happened to stir me earlier."

The train crept on through the flooded country. It was past eight o'clock when they reached Grafton. Marian hurried from the coach and watched anxiously while two baggagemen hoisted the heavy bail from the car.

"Well, my share is done," she said to herself. "That precious bail is here, safe and sound. But where is Mulcahy? And the launch? Rod said that he would not fail to be here by train time."

The train pulled out. From the dim-lit station the ticket agent called to her.

"You're expecting your launch, Miss Hallowell? There has been no boat down to-day."

"But my brother promised to send the launch,"

stammered Marian. "Surely they knew I was coming to-night!"

Then, in a flash of recollection, she heard Roderick's voice:

"And Mulcahy will meet you on the eight-o'clock train."

"Rod meant the train that leaves Saint Louis at eight in the morning! Not this afternoon train. How could I make such a blunder! He does not look for me to reach Grafton till to-morrow."

She looked at the huge, heavy bail.

"If that bail could reach camp to-night, they could ship it up and start to cutting immediately. It would mean seven or eight hours more of working time. But how to take it there!"

"There's a man yonder who owns a gasoline-launch," ventured the agent. "It's a crazy, battered tub, but maybe——"

Marian looked out at the night: the black, sullen river; the ranks of willows swaying in the heavy wind; the thunder that told of approaching storm.

"Call that man over, please. Yes, I shall risk the trip up-river. That bail shall reach camp to-night."

CHAPTER XII

PARTNERS AND VICTORIES

"WHAT time is it, miss?"

Marian put down the gallon tin with which she had bailed steadily, and looked at her watch.

"Almost midnight."

"Only midnight!"

The steersman gave a weary yawn and turned back to his wheel. Inwardly Marian echoed his discouraged word. It seemed to her that she had crouched for years in the stern of the crazy little motor-boat. Rain and spray had drenched her to the skin. She ached in every half-frozen bone. Yet she sat, wide awake and alert, watching her pilot keenly.

He was a poor helmsman, she thought. However, an expert would have found trouble in taking an overloaded launch up-stream against that swollen current and in pitch darkness. Worse, the weight of the heavy dredge-bail weighed the launch

down almost to water level. Every tiny wave splashed over the gunwale. Marian bailed on mechanically.

She had had hard work to bribe the owner to risk the trip up-stream. The men at Grafton had warned her, moreover, that she was running a narrow chance of swamping the launch, and thus of losing her precious piece of machinery, to say nothing of the danger to her own life. But all Marian's old timidity had fled, forgotten. Nothing else mattered if just she might serve her brother in his supreme need.

Through these four dreary hours the old commodore's quaint, frank words had echoed in her mind. And the commodore had been right, she owned, with a quiver of shame. Always, since their mud-pie days, Rod had done his part by her in full measure, generously, lovingly. Never, until these last days, had she even realized what doing her own part by Roderick might mean.

"Although I have been slower than my blessed old Slow-Coach himself in realizing what my life ought to count for. Well, as the commodore said, I have waked up at last. And mind this, Marian

Hallowell! *You stay awake!* Never, never let me catch you dozing off again!"

"There's the camp light yonder," the steersman spoke at last, with a sigh of satisfaction.

Marian peered ahead through the cold, blinding mist. Away up-stream shone a feeble glimmer, then a second light; a third.

"Good! And—there are the dredge search-lights! Only a minute more and we'll be there."

Only a minute it seemed till the launch wheezed up to the landing and swung with a thud against the posts. Marian stumbled ashore.

"Mulcahy!" she called to the dark figure standing on the dredge deck. "Send two men to unload the bail for us."

"Marian Hallowell! Where under the shining sun did you come from?" Roderick leaped from the deck to the shore and confronted his sister. Then, in his horrified surprise at her daring risk, he pounced upon her and administered a scolding of such vigor that it fairly made her gasp.

"Of all the outrageous, reckless——"

"There, there, Rod! Look!"

Still breathing threatenings and slaughter, Rod-

erick turned. Then he saw the huge new bail which the men were hoisting ashore.

"So that's what it all means! That's why you came up on the early train! You brought that bail yourself, all the way. You risked your life in that groggy little boat! All on purpose to help us out! Marian Hallowell, I'd like to shake you hard. And for two cents I'd kiss you right here and now. You—you *peach!*"

Burford, awakened by the launch whistle, was hurrying down the bank. Reaching the landing his eye fell on the precious new bail.

Utterly silent, he stared at it for a long rapt minute. Then, rubbing his sleepy eyes, he turned to Marian and Rod with a grin that fairly lighted up the dock.

"Now," he said, with slow exultation, "now—we've got our chance to win."

And win they did.

True, the water had already risen close to the dreaded three-foot danger-mark. True, neither of the boys had had half a dozen hours of sleep in three days. As for the laborers, they were fagged and overworked to the limit of their endurance.

But not one of these things counted. Not a grumbling word was spoken. This was their company's one chance. Not a man held back from seizing that chance and making good. Not a man but felt himself one with the company, a living vital element of that splendid struggling whole.

Marian and Sally Lou stood on the shore watching the dredge as the great dipper crunched its way through the last submerged barrier. The canal rolled bank full. Little waves swashed over the platform on which they stood. Pools of seep-water already gathered behind the mud embankment, which was crumbling into miry avalanches with every sweep of rising water against it. Not by any chance could the levee stand another hour. But even as the dredge cut that narrow passage, the heavy overflow boiled outward into the river beyond. Minute by minute the rough surface of the canal was sinking before their watching eyes. Now it had fallen from six inches above to high-water mark; now to three inches below; now to mid-stage—and safety.

As the freed stream rolled out into the river, a great cheer rose from the laborers crowded along-

shore. Roderick and Burford stayed aboard the dredge until it was warped alongside the dock and safely moored. Then they crossed to land and joined the girls. Neither of the boys spoke one word. They did not seem to hear the shouts and cheers behind them. There was no glow of success on their sober faces. Perhaps their relief was so great that they were a little stunned before its wonder. Victory was theirs; but victory won in the face of so great a danger that they could not yield and feel assured of their escape.

"We cannot reach head-quarters on the telephone, of course. But, by hook or crook, one of you boys must get a despatch through to Mr. Breckenridge. Think of being able to tell him that you have deepened the canal straight through to the river, so that the whole lower half of the district is safe from overflow! And that you have moved all these costly, treacherous machines down-stream without one serious accident, without so much as a broken bolt! It is too good to be true."

"I'll take a launch and sprint down to Grafton and wire our report from there," said Burford.

His tense face relaxed; he broke into a delighted chuckle. "Think of it: this once I can actually enjoy sending in my report to head-quarters! I'd like to write it out instead of wiring it. I'd put red-ink curlycues and scroll-work dewdabs all over the page. Think, Hollowell, you solemn wooden Indian! The crest of this flood is only two hours away. By noon the highest level will reach our canal. But it can't flood our district for us, for—for we got there first!"

His rosy face one glow of contentment, he started toward the pier. But as he was about to step aboard the duty-launch, Roderick hailed him sharply.

"Wait, Burford. Somebody is coming up the big ditch. A large gray launch, with a little dark-blue flag."

"What!"

Burford sprang back. He shaded his eyes and looked down the canal. Then, to Rod's amazement, he sat down on a pile of two-by-fours and rocked to and fro.

"Whatever ails you, Burford?"

"Whatever ails me, indeed!" Burford choked

it out. His ears were scarlet. His eyes were fairly popping from his head with delight. "Oh, I reckon I won't bother to send that report to headquarters, after all. I'll just let the whole thing slide."

Rod gaped at him.

"Have you lost your last wit, Ned?"

"Not quite. I'm going to give my report to my superior officer by word of mouth. That big gray power-boat is one of our own company's launches. That small blue flag is the company ensign. And that big gray man standing 'midships is—Breckenridge! Breck the Great, his very self."

"Breckenridge!"

"Breckenridge. All there, too—every splendid inch of him. Talk about luck! Our levee is saved. Our dredges are all anchored, right yonder, trim as a gimlet. Our schedule is put through up to the minute. And here, precisely on the psychological moment, comes our chief on his tour of inspection. Can you beat that?"

Roderick merely stared down the canal.

Close behind the launch pilot, scanning the bank intently as they steamed by, towered a broad-

shouldered, heavily built man, gray-headed, yet powerful and alert in every movement. He was well splashed with mud; his broad, heavily featured face was colorless with fatigue. Yet as he stood there, with his big tense body, his tired, eager face, he seemed like some magnificent natural force imprisoned in human flesh.

"Isn't he sumptuous, though?" said Burford, under his breath. "Look at those shoulders! What a half-back he would make!"

"Half-back? Why, he could make the All-American," Rod whispered back. His eyes were glued to that tall approaching figure. His heart was pounding in his breast. So this was Breckenridge the Great, his hero! And, marvel of marvels, he looked the hero of all Rod's farthest dreams.

Breckenridge stepped from the launch and shook hands heartily with the radiant and stammering Burford. He looked at Roderick with steady dark eyes. He hardly spoke in reply to Burford's introduction. But the grip of his big, muscular hand was warmly cordial.

He asked a few brief questions. Then he listened, his heavy head bent, his heavy-lidded eyes

half closed, to Burford's eager account of their struggles and their triumphs. Almost without speaking he clambered into the launch again and motioned the boys to follow.

For four consecutive hours the three went up and down the rough miry channels. Roderick steered the launch. Burford answered Breckenridge's occasional questions. Breckenridge stood, field-glass in hand, sweeping first one bank, then another with tireless eyes. He made almost no comment on Burford's explanations; but the slow occasional nod of his massive head was eloquent.

Finally they retraced the last lateral and brought the launch up to the main landing.

"No, I'll not stop to dine with you, much as I should enjoy it. I must be getting on to the next contract. They're seeing heavy weather too." Breckenridge stood up, stretching his big, cramped body. As he stood there, brushing the clay from his coat, he seemed to loom.

"I have nothing much to say to you fellows," he went on in his quiet, casual voice, "only to remark that you must have worked like Trojans. You have made a far larger yardage record than

we had dared to expect. You've put brains into your work, too. Can't say I'm surprised at your success, by the way. I was pretty certain from what Crosby said that you two would swing this contract, all right. Crosby and I had a talk in Chicago a week or so ago. We were in Tech together. Naturally he's quite a pal of mine, though nowadays we're opponents in a business way. But his opinion weighs heavily with me. And now that I have gone over the ground for myself, I am inclined to think that Crosby rather—well, that he underestimated your services to the company.” Again his big head bent with that queer slow nod. For a moment Breck himself, the real man, alert, just, keenly understanding, flashed a glance from behind that heavy mask of splendid, impassive flesh. “Later you will probably receive a more detailed explanation of my opinion on your work. Good luck to you both, and good-by.”

He stepped into the launch. The powerful boat dashed away down the rough yellow canal.

The boys stood and looked after him. Burford was wildly exultant. But Roderick was silent.

A curious, deep satisfaction lighted his stolid, boyish face. Every word that Breckenridge had spoken was tingling in his blood. At last he had met his hero face to face, man to man. And his hero had proven all that heart could ask.

"I wish I knew what he meant by saying that you'd hear further as to his opinion on your work," pondered Marian.

Just two days later her wish was gratified.

It was a rainy, dreary day. Rod had spent the morning up the laterals and had come home dripping. Marian was trying to dry his soaked clothes before the smoky little oil-stove, but without much success. Just before noon she heard a welcome whistle. She ran down the bank to meet the rural delivery-man in his little spider-launch. The roads were long since impassable; the mail and all the camp supplies must come by water.

"Stacks of letters, Rod. A fat official one for the Burfords and a still fatter, more official one for you. Do read it and tell me your news."

"All right, Sis." Rod pushed aside his blueprints and set to opening his mail.

Marian looked over her own letters. They were all of a sort: pleasant, affectionate notes from her friends at home. All, with one accord, besought her to hurry back to college for commencement. All earnestly pitied her for the tedious weeks that she was spending "in that rough, dreadful western country."

Marian's eyes twinkled as she read. At the bottom of the pile lay a note from her good friend Isabel, begging her for the twentieth time to spend August with her in her beautiful home at Beverly Farms.

Marian read that letter twice. Her dark brows narrowed.

Before her eyes gleamed Isabel's home, the great beautiful house, set on a terraced emerald-green hill. Behind it, dark, cool, mysterious, lay the pine woods; before it flashed and gleamed the sea. She could see its wide, stately rooms, its soft-hued, luxurious furnishings. She could feel the atmosphere of quiet contentment, of assured ease, which was to Isabel and her mother the very air they breathed.

Then she looked around her.

Here she sat in a tiny canvas shack with a rough board floor. She looked at its mended chairs, its rag-tag rug, and stringy curtains; Rod's wet clothes, dripping before the little oil-stove; Rod's battered desk, heaped with papers and blue-prints, a mass of accumulated work. Then she looked through the tent-flap. Neither blue ocean nor deep, still forest met her eyes. Only a narrow, muddy ditch; a row of wind-torn willows; a dark, swollen river, hurrying on beneath a dark, sinister sky.

An exclamation from Rod startled her. He stooped to her, his tired face burning. With unsteady fingers he put a letter into her hand.

"Read that, Sis. No, I'll not read it aloud to you. Look at it with your own eyes."

THE BRECKENRIDGE ENGINEERING COMPANY.

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT.

RODERICK T. HALLOWELL, C. E.,

% Contract Camp, Grafton, Illinois.

SIR: I beg to state that certain changes in the engineering force of the company have brought about a change in the position occupied by yourself with our firm. Beginning upon the first day of June, 1912, you will be transferred to the post of assistant superintendent on a large drainage

contract in northern Iowa. While your position will be second to that of Mr. McPherson, our supervising engineer, yet you will be given entire charge of the assembling of the plant and its construction. Your salary will be two thousand dollars. Payment quarterly, as is our custom.

Some objections to this promotion have been raised by members of our company on the score of your limited experience. Mr. Breckenridge, however, considers from his observation of your methods that you will prove fully equal to this exacting and responsible position.

I am, very respectfully,

THE BRECKENRIDGE ENGINEERING COMPANY.

Per R. W. AUSTIN, *Sec'y.*

Silent, wide-eyed, Marian read this amazing document. Then, with a cry of surprise and delight, she turned to her brother. But before she could speak, a storm of eager feet dashed up the cabin steps. In burst Sally Lou and Ned, headlong. Ned, breathless with excitement, waved a long official envelope. But Sally Lou, close at his heels with Thomas Tucker crowing on her arm, poured out the wild tale.

"Oh, Marian! Oh, Roderick! Oh, it's too good and grand and glorious to be true! We're going home, home, straight back to Virginia!"

"Yes, we're going home, we're fired," puffed Ned, as Sally Lou paused for breath. He sank down on the bench with a sigh of ecstasy. "Don't look so dazed, Hallowell. There is more news coming. We're ordered off this contract. But we're not ordered out of the Breckenridge Engineering Company. Not quite yet. Instead, I'm directed to report on the Dismal Swamp Canal the first of the month. My position will be practically the same as the one that I'm now holding. But we can live at home. *At home*, I say! Right in Norfolk, right in the midst of all Sally Lou's own home-folks, right around the corner from my own father's house. Won't we have a glorious year of it! And won't Edward Junior and Thomas Tucker be good and spoiled, though!"

"We're so happy we can't even say it to each other!" Sally Lou sat down suddenly, hiding her April face in Thomas Tucker's small pinafore. "It took Mammy Easter to express our feelings for us. 'Land, honey,' said she, 'I cert'n'y am thankful that we's goin' back to civilization. I want to climb on a real street-car again. I want to ride in an elevator. I don't care if I never sets

foot in one of dem slippery little launches again, long's I live. But most of all I want to tote dese lambs out of this swamp and on to de dry land before dey grows up plumb web-footed.'"

In the midst of the laugh that followed, a launch whistled from down the canal.

"There's Mulcahy now. Hurry, Ned. Go down to Grafton and send your telegram to head-quarters. Good-by, folks! Come over to the martin-box to-night and we'll hold one last celebration."

Sally Lou tossed her baby to her shoulder. Away she sped beside her husband. Marian looked after the gay, hurrying figures. Then, still bewildered, she turned to Roderick.

"Well! What will happen next! Ned and Sally Lou ordered to Virginia; you promoted—it takes my breath away! But, Rod!" Her voice rose with a startled note. She looked up keenly at her brother's grave face. "You—you dear, cold-blooded old slow-coach! How can you look so pensive and perplexed? Of all the splendid, splendid news! How could you keep still and not tell the Burfords? How can you keep still

now? If I wasn't so tired, I'd dance a jig right here on your desk!"

"I ought to be dancing jigs myself," Roderick answered. "I don't half deserve this magnificent chance, I know that. But I—I don't know what to say. I'm facing a dead wall."

"Rod, what do you mean? Of course you will accept this promotion. You must. There can't be any question!" Marian was on her knees by his chair now, clasping his cold hands in her own. Her voice rang sharp with angry affection. "Don't halt and fumble so, brother! Don't you remember, three months ago, how you fretted and hesitated about taking the position that you are holding to-day? See how you have succeeded in it! Yet look at you! To-day you are wavering and boggling and hanging back, just as you did then."

"I'm hanging back, yes. But not for the same reason." Roderick looked down at her with dark, troubled eyes. "That time, I hesitated to accept on your account. This time, I'm hesitating on my own."

"Why, Roderick Hallowell! You are not afraid

of hard work, nor of taking chances, either. Rod, tell me this minute. Are you ill? What is it, dear?"

"Nonsense. I'm perfectly well. But I am tired out. I don't know how to tell you what I mean. So tired that I dread the mere thought of going on a new contract, and taking charge of a new crew, and breaking myself in to a new piece of work. Yes, it does sound cowardly. But I cannot see my way clear. I don't believe I dare take it up."

Marian looked at him closely.

"Sleep on this, Rod. A night's rest will give you a different light on the matter."

"A night's rest won't make any difference in the facts, Sis. The position is too complicated for a greenhorn like me. I believe I could assemble the plant, all right. And I think I could handle the laborers. But the endless outside detail is what I'm afraid of. That, and the responsibility, too. For instance, on a contract like this one in Iowa, the engineers must act as paymasters, each for his division. That means, reckon the men's time daily; make out their checks; handle their



MARIAN WAS ON HER KNEELS BY HIS CHAIR, CLASPING HIS COLD HANDS IN HER OWN.

wages for them; and so on. Then there are my tabulated reports for the head office. Then my supplies. You have seen with your own eyes how much time and work just the buying of coal and machinery can demand. Then there would be a thousand smaller matters to look after. Taking it all in all, I don't want to make a try at this offer, then fail. So the sensible thing to do is, meekly to ask the company for a less impressive post."

"All that you would need for the extra work that you describe would be a competent book-keeper, Rod."

"Exactly!" Rod laughed shortly. "But a 'competent' book-keeper is the last employé that one can find for such hard, isolated work as this. What I need is not just a man to add columns for me. I need another brain, an extra pair of hands. I need the sort of first-aid that you have been giving me all these weeks, Sis. That's the sort of help that you can't buy for love nor money. That's all."

Marian studied her brother's face. When she spoke, her voice was very gentle and low.

"All right, Rod. Telegraph head-quarters that you will accept."

"Why?"

"Because—I am going to take that position as book-keeper. There, now!"

Roderick sat up with some vehemence.

"Marian Hallowell, I think I see myself letting you do any more of my work. You're going back to college next week, for commencement. Then you may come West again, if you're determined to stay somewhere near me. I'm mighty glad to have you within reach, I must admit that. But you are not to live down in the woods any longer. And not another stroke of my work shall you do."

"Why not? Am I such a poor stenographer?"

Roderick laughed at her injured tone. Pride and affection mingled in that laugh.

"You have been invaluable, Sis. You know that perfectly well. I'd never have pulled through this month without you. You have been of more real use than any three ordinary stenographers rolled together. For you have used your own brains and will and courage. You have not stood gracefully by and waited for orders. You have

marched right on, and you have done a man's work straight through. But our long pull is over now. And you are well and strong again, I'm thankful to say. So back to the East you go, old lady. No more contract jobs for you."

Marian's eyes narrowed ominously. Deliberately she seated herself on the arm of her brother's chair. Gently but firmly she seized him by both ears.

"Now, Roderick Hallowell, listen to me. Three months ago the company offered you this position. I wanted you to accept it. But, of all things, I did *not* want to go West with you. I teased and coaxed and whined. Much good my whining did me. For you just set that Rock-o'-Gibraltar chin of yours, and took me firmly by the collar and marched me along.

"Now, Roderick Hallowell, look at me!"

Chuckling and shamefaced, Roderick struggled to turn his face away; but Marian's fingers gripped mercilessly tight.

"Look at me, I say. Answer. Didn't you bully me into giving up to your wishes, by threatening to refuse this position unless I'd come West

with you? Didn't you drag me out here willy-nilly? Very well. You have had your way. You have brought me here, and—*you can't send me back.* There now."

"Marian, this is not fair." Roderick freed one ear and looked sternly at his sister. "You must finish your education. I have no right to keep you trailing around the country with me, wasting your time and cutting you off from your friends and denying you any home comfort. You shall not sacrifice yourself——"

"Sacrifice myself, indeed!" Marian took a fresh grip. "All I ask is to stay with you until next February. Then I'll go back and take up my college work at the exact point where I laid it down. I cannot graduate with my class, no matter how hard I try. My illness last winter took too much time. So I may as well join the class following, at mid-years'. In the mean time, we will have eight splendid months together. No, I have waked up, Rod. You can't hush me off to my selfish doze again."

"But, Marian, I can't possibly permit——"

"Yes, you can. And you will. As to home

comforts—isn't it home, wherever we two are together? As to being cut off from my friends—aren't you the best chum I ever had? How do you suppose I like being cut off from you, brother?"

Rod did not answer. At last he looked up. The sober gratitude in his eyes brought an answering radiance to Marian's own.

"I give up, Sis. You shall stay with me for the summer, anyway. Then we'll see. Now run away, you blessed old partner!" His big hands shut on her shoulders with an eloquent grip. "I'm going to write to head-quarters and accept that position before I have time to turn coward again and change my mind."

Marian gave him a vigorous hug of satisfaction, and ran away. Letter in hand, Roderick went to his desk.

Carefully he set down his formal, courteous acceptance. He read the finished letter with critical care. Something was lacking. Yet he had taken all possible pains. What more could his reply need?

Suddenly his face brightened. He took up his

pen. Slowly and carefully he added a final paragraph.

“In accepting this promotion, I wish to do so with the understanding that my sister, Miss Hallowell, who has acted as my assistant during the past month, shall continue to hold that position under the new contract. As her work is to be counted as a part of my own, I will request that my quarterly checks shall be made out, not to R. T. Hallowell, but to ‘Hallowell & Hallowell,’ as the salary is to be drawn by us on a basis of equal partnership.”

He put down the finished sheet. His boyish face lighted with a slow, triumphant glow. He looked out across the gray wet country, the fog-banked river. To his eyes the dull scene was illumined. For his steady vision could see past that gray dreariness, far up the broad high-road of work and success that he had now set foot upon. These three months of heavy toil had proven him. He had seized his fighting chance, and he had made good. And now all the royal chances of his profession were waiting at his call.

“Though I never could have put it through without Marian,” he said under his breath. “My splendid, plucky little old Sis! No wonder I made good, with such a partner. And from now on she shall be my real partner, bless her heart. ‘Hallowell & Halloweli,’ now and forever!”

